



THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

RUDYARD KIPLING



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The light that failed

Rudyard Kipling

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THE SERVICE EDITION
OF
THE WORKS OF
RUDYARD KIPLING



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THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

THE WORKS OF

VOL. II

ROBERT B. KIPPLING



THE
LIGHT THAT FAILED

BY
RUDYARD KIPLING

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II

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CHAPTER IX

If I have taken the common clay
And wrought it cunningly
In the shape of a god that was dugged a clod,
The greater honour to me.'

'If thou hast taken the common clay,
And thy hands be not free
From the taint of the soil, thou hast made thy spoil
The greater shame to thee.'

The Two Potters.

HE did no work of any kind for the rest of the week. Then came another Sunday. He dreaded and longed for the day always, but since the red-haired girl had sketched him there was rather more dread than desire in his mind.

He found that Maisie had entirely neglected his suggestions about line-work. She had gone off at score filled with some absurd notion for a 'fancy head.' It cost Dick something to command his temper.

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‘What’s the good of suggesting anything?’ he said pointedly.

‘Ah, but this will be a picture,—a real picture; and I know that Kami will let me send it to the Salon. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘I suppose not. But you won’t have time for the Salon.’

Maisie hesitated a little. She even felt uncomfortable.

‘We’re going over to France a month sooner because of it. I shall get the idea sketched out here and work it up at Kami’s.’

Dick’s heart stood still, and he came very near to being disgusted with his queen who could do no wrong. ‘Just when I thought I had made some headway, she goes off chasing butterflies. It’s too maddening!’

There was no possibility of arguing, for the red-haired girl was in the studio. Dick could only look unutterable reproach.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘and I think you make a mistake. But what’s the idea of your new picture?’

‘I took it from a book.’

‘That’s bad, to begin with. Books aren’t the places for pictures. And——’

‘It’s this,’ said the red-haired girl behind him. ‘I was reading it to Maisie the other day from

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The City of Dreadful Night. D'you know the book ?'

'A little. I am sorry I spoke. There are pictures in it. What has taken her fancy ?'

'The description of the Melancolia—

'Her folded wings as of a mighty eagle,
But all too impotent to lift the regal
Robustness of her earth-born strength and pride.

And here again. (Maisie, get the tea, dear.)

'The forehead charged with baleful thoughts and dreams,
The household bunch of keys, the housewife's gown,
Voluminous indented, and yet rigid
As though a shell of burnished metal frigid,
Her feet thick-shod to tread all weakness down.'

There was no attempt to conceal the scorn of the lazy voice. Dick winced.

'But that has been done already by an obscure artist of the name of Dürer,' said he. 'How does the poem run ?—

'Three centuries and threescore years ago,
With phantasies of his peculiar thought.

You might as well try to rewrite *Hamlet*. It will be waste of time.'

'No, it won't,' said Maisie, putting down the teacups with clatter to reassure herself. 'And I mean to do it. Can't you see what a beautiful thing it would make ?'

'How in perdition can one do work when one

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hasn't had the proper training? Any fool can get a notion. It needs training to drive the thing through,—training and conviction; not rushing after the first fancy.' Dick spoke between his teeth.

'You don't understand,' said Maisie. 'I think I can do it.'

Again the voice of the girl behind him—

'Baffled and beaten back, she works on still;

Weary and sick of soul, she works the more.

Sustained by her indomitable will,

The hands shall fashion, and the brain shall pore,

And all her sorrow shall be turned to labour—

I fancy Maisie means to embody herself in the picture.'

'Sitting on a throne of rejected pictures? No, I shan't, dear. The notion in itself has fascinated me.—Of course you don't care for fancy heads, Dick. I don't think you could do them. You like blood and bones.'

'That's a direct challenge. If you can do a Melancholia that isn't merely a sorrowful female head, I can do a better one; and I will, too. What d'you know about Melancholias?' Dick firmly believed that he was even then tasting three-quarters of all the sorrow in the world.

'She was a woman,' said Maisie, 'and she suffered a great deal,—till she could suffer no more. Then

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she began to laugh at it all, and then I painted her and sent her to the Salon.'

The red-haired girl rose up and left the room, laughing.

Dick looked at Maisie humbly and hopelessly.

'Never mind about the picture,' he said. 'Are you really going back to Kami's a month before your time?'

'I must, if I want to get the picture done.'

'And that's all you want?'

'Of course. Don't be stupid, Dick.'

'You haven't the power. You have only the ideas—the ideas and the little cheap impulses. How you could have kept at your work for ten years steadily is a mystery to me. So you are really going,—a month before you need?'

'I must do my work.'

'Your work—bah! . . . No, I didn't mean that. It's all right, dear. Of course you must do your work, and—I think I'll say good-bye for this week.'

'Won't you even stay for tea?'

'No, thank you. Have I your leave to go, dear? There's nothing more you particularly want me to do, and the line-work doesn't matter.'

'I wish you could stay, and then we could talk over my picture. If only one single picture's a success it draws attention to all the others. I know some of my work is good, if only people

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could see. And you needn't have been so rude about it.'

'I'm sorry. We'll talk the Melancolia over some one of the other Sundays. There are four more—yes, one, two, three, four—before you go. Good-bye, Maisie.'

Maisie stood by the studio window, thinking, till the red-haired girl returned, a little white at the corners of her lips.

'Dick's gone off,' said Maisie. 'Just when I wanted to talk about the picture. Isn't it selfish of him?'

Her companion opened her lips as if to speak, shut them again, and went on reading *The City of Dreadful Night*.

Dick was in the Park, walking round and round a tree that he had chosen as his confidante for many Sundays past. He was swearing audibly, and when he found that the infirmities of the English tongue hemmed in his rage, he sought consolation in Arabic, which is expressly designed for the use of the afflicted. He was not pleased with the reward of his patient service; nor was he pleased with himself; and it was long before he arrived at the proposition that the queen could do no wrong.

'It's a losing game,' he said. 'I'm worth nothing when a whim of hers is in question. But in a

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losing game at Port Said we used to double the stakes and go on. She do a Melancolia! She hasn't the power, or the insight, or the training. Only the desire. She's cursed with the curse of Reuben. She won't do line-work, because it means real work; and yet she's stronger than I am. I'll make her understand that I can beat her on her own Melancolia. Even then she wouldn't care. She says I can only do blood and bones. I don't believe she has blood in her veins. All the same I love her; and I must go on loving her; and if I can humble her inordinate vanity I will. I'll do a Melancolia that shall be something like a Melancolia,—"the Melancolia that transcends all wit." I'll do it at once, con—bless her.'

He discovered that the notion would not come to order, and that he could not free his mind for an hour from the thought of Maisie's departure. He took very small interest in her rough studies for the Melancolia when she showed them next week. The Sundays were racing past, and the time was at hand when all the church bells in London could not ring Maisie back to him. Once or twice he said something to Binkie about 'hermaphroditic futilities,' but the little dog received so many confidences both from Torpenhow and Dick that he did not trouble his tulip-ears to listen.

Dick was permitted to see the girls off. They

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were going by the Dover night-boat; and they hoped to return in August. It was then February, and Dick felt that he was being hardly used. Maisie was so busy stripping the small house across the Park, and packing her canvases, that she had no time for thought. Dick went down to Dover and wasted a day there fretting over a wonderful possibility. Would Maisie at the very last allow him one small kiss? He reflected that he might capture her by the strong arm, as he had seen women captured in the Southern Soudan, and lead her away; but Maisie would never be led. She would turn her gray eyes upon him and say, 'Dick, how selfish you are!' Then his courage would fail him. It would be better, after all, to beg for that kiss.

Maisie looked more than usually kissable as she stepped from the night-mail on to the windy pier, in a gray waterproof and a little gray cloth travelling-cap. The red-haired girl was not so lovely. Her green eyes were hollow and her lips were dry. Dick saw the trunks aboard, and went to Maisie's side in the darkness under the bridge. The mail-bags were thundering into the forehold, and the red-haired girl was watching them.

'You'll have a rough passage to-night,' said Dick. 'It's blowing outside. I suppose I may come over and see you if I'm good?'

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'You mustn't. I shall be busy. At least, if I want you I'll send for you. But I shall write from Vitry-sur-Marne. I shall have heaps of things to consult you about. Oh, Dick, you have been so good to me!—so good to me!'

'Thank you for that, dear. It hasn't made any difference, has it?'

'I can't tell a fib. It hasn't—in that way. But don't think I'm not grateful.'

'Damn the gratitude!' said Dick huskily to the paddle-box.

'What's the use of worrying? You know I should ruin your life, and you'd ruin mine, as things are now. You remember what you said when you were so angry that day in the Park? One of us has to be broken. Can't you wait till that day comes?'

'No, love. I want you unbroken—all to myself.'

Maisie shook her head. 'My poor Dick, what can I say?'

'Don't say anything. Give me a kiss? Only one kiss, Maisie. I'll swear I won't take any more. You might as well, and then I can be sure you're grateful.'

Maisie put her cheek forward, and Dick took his reward in the darkness. It was only one kiss, but, since there was no time-limit specified, it was

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a long one. Maisie wrenched herself free angrily, and Dick stood abashed and tingling from head to heel.

‘Good-bye, darling. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry. Only—keep well and do good work,—specially the Melancolia. I’m going to do one, too. Remember me to Kami, and be careful what you drink. Country drinking-water is bad everywhere, but it’s worse in France. Write to me if you want anything, and good-bye. Say good-bye to the what-you-call-um girl, and—can’t I have another kiss? No. You’re quite right. Good-bye.’

A shout told him that it was not seemly to charge up the mail-bag incline. He reached the pier as the steamer began to move off, and he followed her with his heart.

‘And there’s nothing—nothing in the wide world—to keep us apart except her obstinacy. These Calais night-boats are much too small. I’ll get Torp to write to the papers about it. She’s beginning to pitch already.’

Maisie stood where Dick had left her till she heard a little gasping cough at her elbow. The red-haired girl’s eyes were alight with cold flame.

‘He kissed you!’ she said. ‘How could you let him, when he wasn’t anything to you? How dared you take a kiss from him? Oh, Maisie, let’s go to the ladies’ cabin. I’m sick,—deadly sick.’

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'We aren't into open water yet. Go down, dear, and I'll stay here. I don't like the smell of the engines. . . . Poor Dick! He deserved one, —only one. But I didn't think he'd frighten me so.'

Dick returned to town next day just in time for lunch, for which he had telegraphed. To his disgust, there were only empty plates in the studio. He lifted up his voice like the bears in the fairy-tale, and Torpenhow entered, looking very guilty.

'H'sh!' said he. 'Don't make such a noise. I took it. Come into my rooms, and I'll show you why.'

Dick paused amazed at the threshold, for on Torpenhow's sofa lay a girl asleep and breathing heavily. The little cheap sailor-hat, the blue-and-white dress, fitter for June than for February, dabbled with mud at the skirts, the jacket trimmed with imitation Astrakhan and ripped at the shoulder-seams, the one-and-elevenpenny umbrella, and, above all, the disgraceful condition of the kid-topped boots, declared all things.

'Oh, I say, old man, this is too bad! You mustn't bring this sort up here. They steal things from the rooms.'

'It looks bad, I admit, but I was coming in after lunch, and she staggered into the hall. I thought she was drunk at first, but it was collapse. I

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couldn't leave her as she was, so I brought her up here and gave her your lunch. She was fainting from want of food. She went fast asleep the minute she had finished.'

'I know something of that complaint. She's been living on sausages, I suppose. Torp, you should have handed her over to a policeman for presuming to faint in a respectable house. Poor little wretch! Look at that face! There isn't an ounce of immorality in it. Only folly,—slack, fatuous, feeble, futile folly. It's a typical head. D'you notice how the skull begins to show through the flesh padding on the face and cheek-bone?'

'What a cold-blooded barbarian it is! Don't hit a woman when she's down. Can't we do anything? She was simply dropping with starvation. She almost fell into my arms, and when she got to the food she ate like a wild beast. It was horrible.'

'I can give her money, which she would probably spend in drinks. Is she going to sleep for ever?'

The girl opened her eyes and glared at the men between terror and effrontery.

'Feeling better?' said Torpenhow.

'Yes. Thank you. There aren't many gentlemen that are as kind as you are. Thank you.'

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‘When did you leave service?’ said Dick, who had been watching the scarred and chapped hands.

‘How did you know I was in service? I was. General servant. I didn’t like it.’

‘And how do you like being your own mistress?’

‘Do I look as if I liked it?’

‘I suppose not. One moment. Would you be good enough to turn your face to the window?’

The girl obeyed, and Dick watched her face keenly,—so keenly that she made as if to hide behind Torpenhow.

‘The eyes have it,’ said Dick, walking up and down. ‘They are superb eyes for my business. And, after all, every head depends on the eyes. This has been sent from heaven to make up for—what was taken away. Now the weekly strain’s off my shoulders, I can get to work in earnest. Evidently sent from heaven. Yes. Raise your chin a little, please.’

‘Gently, old man, gently. You’re scaring somebody out of her wits,’ said Torpenhow, who could see the girl trembling.

‘Don’t let him hit me! Oh, please don’t let him hit me! I’ve been hit cruel to-day because I spoke to a man. Don’t let him look at me like that! He’s reg’lar wicked, that one. Don’t let

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him look at me like that, neither! Oh, I feel as if I hadn't nothing on when he looks at me like that!

The overstrained nerves in the frail body gave way, and the girl wept like a little child and began to scream. Dick threw open the window, and Torpenhow flung the door back.

'There you are,' said Dick soothingly. 'My friend here can call for a policeman, and you can run through that door. Nobody is going to hurt you.'

The girl sobbed convulsively for a few minutes, and then tried to laugh.

'Nothing in the world to hurt you. Now listen to me for a minute. I'm what they call an artist by profession. You know what artists do?'

'They draw the things in red and black ink on the pop-shop labels.'

'I daresay. I haven't risen to pop-shop labels yet. Those are done by the Academicians. I want to draw your head.'

'What for?'

'Because it's pretty. That is why you will come to the room across the landing three times a week at eleven in the morning, and I'll give you three quid a week just for sitting still and being drawn. And there's a quid on account.'

'For nothing? Oh, my!' The girl turned the sovereign in her hand, and with more foolish

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tears: 'Ain't neither o' you two gentlemen afraid of my bilking you?'

'No. Only ugly girls do that. Try and remember this place. And, by the way, what's your name?'

'I'm Bessie,—Bessie—— It's no use giving the rest. Bessie Broke,—Stone-broke if you like. What's your names? But there,—no one ever gives the real ones.'

Dick consulted Torpenhow with his eyes.

'My name's Heldar, and my friend's called Torpenhow; and you must be sure to come here. Where do you live?'

'South-the-water,—one room,—five and six-pence a week. Aren't you making fun of me about that three quid?'

'You'll see later on. And, Bessie, next time you come, remember, you needn't wear that paint. It's bad for the skin, and I have all the colours you'll be likely to need.'

Bessie withdrew, scrubbing her cheek with a ragged pocket-handkerchief. The two men looked at each other.

'You're a man,' said Torpenhow.

'I'm afraid I've been a fool. It isn't our business to run about the earth reforming Bessie Brokes. And a woman of any kind has no right on this landing.'

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‘Perhaps she won’t come back.’

‘She will if she thinks she can get food and warmth here. I know she will, worse luck. But remember, old man, she isn’t a woman: she’s my model; and be careful.’

‘The idea! She’s a dissolute little scarecrow,—a gutter-snippet and nothing more.’

‘So you think. Wait till she has been fed a little and freed from fear. That fair type recovers itself very quickly. You won’t know her in a week or two, when that abject fear has died out of her eyes. She’ll be too happy and smiling for my purposes.’

‘But surely you’re taking her out of charity?—to please me?’

‘I am not in the habit of playing with hot coals to please anybody. She has been sent from heaven, as I may have remarked before, to help me with my Melancholia.’

‘Never heard a word about the lady before.’

‘What’s the use of having a friend if you must sling your notions at him in words? You ought to know what I’m thinking about. You’ve heard me grunt lately?’

‘Even so; but grunts mean anything in your language, from bad ’baccy to wicked dealers. And I don’t think I’ve been much in your confidence for some time.’

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'It was a high and soulful grunt. You ought to have understood that it meant the Melancholia.' Dick walked Torpenhow up and down the room, keeping silence. Then he smote him in the ribs. 'Now don't you see it? Bessie's abject futility, and the terror in her eyes, welded on to one or two details in the way of sorrow that have come under my experience lately. Likewise some orange and black,—two keys of each. But I can't explain on an empty stomach.'

'It sounds mad enough. You'd better stick to your soldiers, Dick, instead of maundering about heads and eyes and experiences.'

'Think so?' Dick began to dance on his heels, singing—

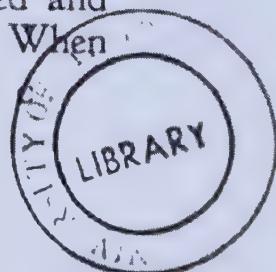
'They're as proud as a turkey when they hold the ready cash,

You ought to 'ear the way they laugh an' joke;
They are tricky an' they're funny when they've got the ready money,—

Ow! but see 'em when they're all stone-broke.'

Then he sat down to pour out his heart to Maisie in a four-sheet letter of counsel and encouragement, and registered an oath that he would get to work with an undivided heart as soon as Bessie should reappear.

The girl kept her appointment unpainted and unadorned, afraid and overbold by turns. When



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she found that she was merely expected to sit still, she grew calmer, and criticised the appointments of the studio with freedom and some point. She liked the warmth and the comfort and the release from fear of physical pain. Dick made two or three studies of her head in monochrome, but the actual notion of the Melancolia would not arrive.

‘What a mess you keep your things in!’ said Bessie, some days later, when she felt herself thoroughly at home. ‘I s’pose your clothes are just as bad. Gentlemen never think what buttons and tape are made for.’

‘I buy things to wear, and wear ’em till they go to pieces. I don’t know what Torpenhow does.’

Bessie made diligent inquiry in the latter’s room, and unearthed a bale of disreputable socks. ‘Some of these I’ll mend now,’ she said, ‘and some I’ll take home. D’you know, I sit all day long at home doing nothing, just like a lady, and no more noticing them other girls in the house than if they was so many flies? I don’t have any unnecessary words, but I put ’em down quick, I can tell you, when they talk to me. No; it’s quite nice these days. I lock my door, and they can only call me names through the keyhole, and I sit inside, just like a lady, mending socks. Mr. Torpenhow wears his socks out both ends at once.’

‘Three quid a week from me, and the delights

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of my society. No socks mended. Nothing from Torp except a nod on the landing now and again, and all his socks mended. Bessie is very much a woman,' thought Dick; and he looked at her between half-shut eyes. Food and rest had transformed the girl, as Dick knew they would.

'What are you looking at me like that for?' she said quickly. 'Don't. You look reg'lar bad when you look that way. You don't think much o' me, do you?'

'That depends on how you behave.'

Bessie behaved beautifully. Only it was difficult at the end of a sitting to bid her go out into the gray streets. She very much preferred the studio and a big chair by the stove, with some socks in her lap as an excuse for delay. Then Torpenhow would come in, and Bessie would be moved to tell strange and wonderful stories of her past, and still stranger ones of her present improved circumstances. She would make them tea as though she had a right to make it; and once or twice on these occasions Dick caught Torpenhow's eyes fixed on the trim little figure, and because Bessie's flittings about the room made Dick ardently long for Maisie, he realised whither Torpenhow's thoughts were tending. And Bessie was exceedingly careful of the condition of Torpenhow's linen. She spoke very little to him,

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but sometimes they talked together on the landing.

‘I was a great fool,’ Dick said to himself. ‘I know what red firelight looks like when a man’s trampling through a strange town; and ours is a lonely, selfish sort of life at the best. I wonder Maisie doesn’t feel that sometimes. But I can’t order Bessie away. That’s the worst of beginning things. One never knows where they stop.’

One evening, after a sitting prolonged to the last limit of the light, Dick was roused from a nap by a broken voice in Torpenhow’s room. He jumped to his feet. ‘Now what ought I to do? It looks foolish to go in.—Oh, bless you, Binkie!’ The little terrier thrust Torpenhow’s door open with his nose and came out to take possession of Dick’s chair. The door swung wide unheeded, and Dick across the landing could see Bessie in the half-light making her little supplication to Torpenhow. She was kneeling by his side, and her hands were clasped across his knee.

‘I know,—I know,’ she said thickly. ‘’Tisn’t right o’ me to do this, but I can’t help it; and you were so kind,—so kind; and you never took any notice o’ me. And I’ve mended all your things so carefully,—I did. Oh, please, ’tisn’t as if I was asking you to marry me. I wouldn’t think of it. But cou—couldn’t you take and live

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with me till Miss Right comes along? I'm only Miss Wrong, I know, but I'd work my hands to the bare bone for you. And I'm not ugly to look at. Say you will?'

Dick hardly recognised Torpenhow's voice in reply—

'But look here. It's no use. I'm liable to be ordered off anywhere at a minute's notice if a war breaks out. At a minute's notice—dear.'

'What does that matter? Until you go, then. Until you go. 'Tisn't much I'm asking, and—you don't know how good I can cook.' She had put an arm round his neck and was drawing his head down.

'Until—I—go, then.'

'Torp,' said Dick across the landing. He could hardly steady his voice. 'Come here a minute, old man. I'm in trouble.'—'Heaven send he'll listen to me!' There was something very like an oath from Bessie's lips. She was afraid of Dick, and disappeared down the staircase in panic, but it seemed an age before Torpenhow entered the studio. He went to the mantelpiece, buried his head on his arms, and groaned like a wounded bull.

'What the devil right have you to interfere?' he said, at last.

'Who's interfering with which? Your own sense told you long ago you couldn't be such a

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fool. It was a tough rack, St. Anthony, but you're all right now.'

'I oughtn't to have seen her moving about these rooms as if they belonged to her. That's what upset me. It gives a lonely man a sort of hankering, doesn't it?' said Torpenhow piteously.

'Now you talk sense. It does. But, since you aren't in a condition to discuss the disadvantages of double housekeeping, do you know what you're going to do?'

'I don't. I wish I did.'

'You're going away for a season on a brilliant tour to regain tone. You're going to Brighton, or Scarborough, or Prawle Point, to see the ships go by. And you're going at once. Isn't it odd? I'll take care of Binkie, but out you go immediately. Never resist the devil. He holds the bank. Fly from him. Pack your things and go.'

'I believe you're right. Where shall I go?'

'And you call yourself a special correspondent! Pack first and inquire afterwards.'

An hour later Torpenhow was despatched into the night in a hansom. 'You'll probably think of some place to go to while you're moving,' said Dick. 'Go to Euston, to begin with, and—oh yes—get drunk to-night.'

He returned to the studio, and lighted more candles, for he found the room very dark.

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‘Oh, you Jezebel! you futile little Jezebel! Won’t you hate me to-morrow?—Binkie, come here.’

Binkie turned over on his back on the hearth-rug, and Dick stirred him with a meditative foot.

‘I said she was not immoral. I was wrong. She said she could cook. That showed premeditated sin. Oh, Binkie, if you are a man you will go to perdition; but if you are a woman, and say that you can cook, you will go to a much worse place.’

CHAPTER X

What's yon that follows at my side?—
The foe that ye must fight, my lord.—
That hirples swift as I can ride?—
The shadow of the night, my lord.—
Then wheel my horse against the foe!—
He's down and overpast, my lord.
Ye war against the sunset glow :
The darkness gathers fast, my lord.

The Fight of Heriot's Ford.

'THIS is a cheerful life,' said Dick, some days later. 'Torp's away ; Bessie hates me ; I can't get at the notion of the Melancolia ; Maisie's letters are scrappy ; and I believe I have indigestion. What gives a man pains across his head and spots before his eyes, Binkie ? Shall us take some liver pills ?'

Dick had just gone through a lively scene with Bessie. She had for the fiftieth time reproached him for sending Torpenhow away. She explained her enduring hatred for Dick, and made it clear to him that she only sat for the sake of his money.

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‘And Mr. Torpenhow’s ten times a better man than you,’ she concluded.

‘He is. That’s why he went away. I should have stayed and made love to you.’

The girl sat with her chin on her hand, scowling. ‘To me! I’d like to catch you! If I wasn’t afraid o’ being hung I’d kill you. That’s what I’d do. D’you believe me?’

Dick smiled wearily. It is not pleasant to live in the company of a notion that will not work out, a fox-terrier that cannot talk, and a woman who talks too much. He would have answered, but at that moment there unrolled itself from one corner of the studio a veil, as it were, of the filmiest gauze. He rubbed his eyes, but the gray haze would not go.

‘This is disgraceful indigestion. Binkie, we will go to a medicine-man. We can’t have our eyes interfered with, for by these we get our bread; also mutton-chop bones for little dogs.’

The doctor was an affable local practitioner with white hair, and he said nothing till Dick began to describe the gray film in the studio.

‘We all want a little patching and repairing from time to time,’ he chirped. ‘Like a ship, my dear sir,—exactly like a ship. Sometimes the hull is out of order, and we consult the surgeon; sometimes the rigging, and then I advise; sometimes the

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engines, and we go to the brain-specialist; sometimes the look-out on the bridge is tired, and then we see an oculist. I should recommend you to see an oculist. A little patching and repairing from time to time is all we want. An oculist, by all means.'

Dick sought an oculist,—the best in London. He was certain that the local practitioner did not know anything about his trade, and more certain that Maisie would laugh at him if he were forced to wear spectacles.

'I've neglected the warnings of my lord the stomach too long. Hence these spots before the eyes, Binkie. I can see as well as I ever could.'

As he entered the dark hall that led to the consulting-room a man cannoned against him. Dick saw the face as it hurried out into the street.

'That's the writer-type. He has the same modelling of the forehead as Torp. He looks very sick. Probably heard something he didn't like.'

Even as he thought, a great fear came upon Dick, a fear that made him hold his breath as he walked into the oculist's waiting-room, with the heavy carved furniture, the dark-green paper, and the sober-hued prints on the wall. He recognised a reproduction of one of his own sketches.

Many people were waiting their turn before him. His eye was caught by a flaming red-and-

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gold Christmas-carol book. Little children came to that eye-doctor, and they needed large-type amusement.

‘That’s idolatrous bad Art,’ he said, drawing the book towards himself. ‘From the anatomy of the angels, it has been made in Germany.’ He opened it mechanically, and there leaped to his eyes a verse printed in red ink—

The next good joy that Mary had,
It was the joy of three,
To see her good Son Jesus Christ
Making the blind to see ;
Making the blind to see, good Lord,
And happy may we be.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost
To all eternity !

Dick read and re-read the verse till his turn came, and the doctor was bending above him seated in an arm-chair. The blaze of a gas-microscope in his eyes made him wince. The doctor’s hand touched the scar of the sword-cut on Dick’s head, and Dick explained briefly how he had come by it. When the flame was removed, Dick saw the doctor’s face, and the fear came upon him again. The doctor wrapped himself in a mist of words. Dick caught allusions to ‘scar,’ ‘frontal bone,’ ‘optic nerve,’ ‘extreme caution,’ and the ‘avoidance of mental anxiety.’

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‘Verdict?’ he said faintly. ‘My business is painting, and I daren’t waste time. What do you make of it?’

Again the whirl of words, but this time they conveyed a meaning.

‘Can you give me anything to drink?’

Many sentences were pronounced in that darkened room, and the prisoners often needed cheering. Dick found a glass of liqueur brandy in his hand.

‘As far as I can gather,’ he said, coughing above the spirit, ‘you call it decay of the optic nerve, or something, and therefore hopeless. What is my time-limit, avoiding all strain and worry?’

‘Perhaps one year.’

‘My God! And if I don’t take care of myself?’

‘I really could not say. One cannot ascertain the exact amount of injury inflicted by the sword-cut. The scar is an old one, and—exposure to the strong light of the desert, did you say?—with excessive application to fine work? I really could not say.’

‘I beg your pardon, but it has come without any warning. If you will let me, I’ll sit here for a minute, and then I’ll go. You have been very good in telling me the truth. Without any warning; without any warning. Thanks.’

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Dick went into the street, and was rapturously received by Binkie. 'We've got it very badly, little dog! Just as badly as we can get it. We'll go to the Park to think it out.'

They headed for a certain tree that Dick knew well, and they sat down to think, because his legs were trembling under him and there was cold fear at the pit of his stomach.

'How could it have come without any warning? It's as sudden as being shot. It's the living death, Binkie. We're to be shut up in the dark in one year if we're careful, and we shan't see anybody, and we shall never have anything we want, not though we live to be a hundred.' Binkie wagged his tail joyously. 'Binkie, we must think. Let's see how it feels to be blind.' Dick shut his eyes, and flaming commas and Catherine-wheels floated inside the lids. Yet when he looked across the Park the scope of his vision was not contracted. He could see perfectly, until a procession of slow-wheeling fireworks defiled across his eyeballs.

'Little dorglums, we aren't at all well. Let's go home. If only Torp were back, now!'

But Torpenhow was in the south of England, inspecting dockyards in the company of the Nilghai. His letters were brief and full of mystery.

Dick had never asked anybody to help him in his joys or his sorrows. He argued, in the lone-

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liness of the studio, henceforward to be decorated with a film of gray gauze in one corner, that, if his fate were blindness, all the Torpenhows in the world could not save him. 'I can't call him off his trip to sit down and sympathise with me. I must pull through the business alone,' he said. He was lying on the sofa, eating his moustache and wondering what the darkness of the night would be like. Then came to his mind the memory of a quaint scene in the Soudan. A soldier had been nearly hacked in two by a broad-bladed Arab spear. For one instant the man felt no pain. Looking down, he saw that his life-blood was going from him. The stupid bewilderment on his face was so intensely comic that both Dick and Torpenhow, still panting and unstrung from a fight for life, had roared with laughter, in which the man seemed as if he would join, but, as his lips parted in a sheepish grin, the agony of death came upon him, and he pitched grunting at their feet. Dick laughed again, remembering the horror. It seemed so exactly like his own case. 'But I have a little more time allowed me,' he said. He paced up and down the room, quietly at first, but afterwards with the hurried feet of fear. It was as though a black shadow stood at his elbow and urged him to go forward; and there were only weaving circles and floating pin-dots before his eyes.

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‘We must be calm, Binkie; we must be calm.’ He talked aloud for the sake of distraction. ‘This isn’t nice at all. What shall we do? We must do something. Our time is short. I shouldn’t have believed that this morning; but now things are different. Binkie, where was Moses when the light went out?’

Binkie smiled from ear to ear, as a well-bred terrier should, but made no suggestion.

“‘Were there but world enough and time, This coyness, Binkie, were no crime. . . . But at my back I always hear——’” He wiped his forehead, which was unpleasantly damp. ‘What can I do? What can I do? I haven’t any notions left, and I can’t think connectedly, but I must do something, or I shall go off my head.’

The hurried walk recommenced, Dick stopping every now and again to drag forth long-neglected canvases and old note-books; for he turned to his work by instinct, as a thing that could not fail. ‘You won’t do, and you won’t do,’ he said, at each inspection. ‘No more soldiers. I couldn’t paint ’em. Sudden death comes home too nearly, and this is battle and murder both for me.’

The day was failing, and Dick thought for a moment that the twilight of the blind had come upon him unawares. ‘Allah Almighty!’ he cried despairingly, ‘help me through the time of waiting,

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and I won't whine when my punishment comes. What can I do now, before the light goes ?'

There was no answer. Dick waited till he could regain some sort of control over himself. His hands were shaking, and he prided himself on their steadiness ; he could feel that his lips were quivering, and the sweat was running down his face. He was lashed by fear, driven forward by the desire to get to work at once and accomplish something, and maddened by the refusal of his brain to do more than repeat the news that he was about to go blind. 'It's a humiliating exhibition,' he thought, 'and I'm glad Torp isn't here to see. The doctor said I was to avoid mental worry. Come here and let me pet you, Binkie.'

The little dog yelped because Dick nearly squeezed the bark out of him. Then he heard the man speaking in the twilight, and, doglike, understood that his trouble stood off from him—

'Allah is good, Binkie. Not quite so gentle as we could wish, but we'll discuss that later. I think I see my way to it now. All those studies of Bessie's head were nonsense, and they nearly brought your master into a scrape. I hold the notion now as clear as crystal,—"the Melancholia that transcends all wit." There shall be Maisie in that head, because I shall never get Maisie ; and Bess, of course, because she knows all about Melan-

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colia, though she doesn't know she knows; and there shall be some drawing in it, and it shall all end up with a laugh. That's for myself. Shall she giggle or grin? No, she shall laugh right out of the canvas, and every man and woman that ever had a sorrow of their own shall—what is it the poem says?—

‘Understand the speech and feel a stir
Of fellowship in all disastrous fight.

“In all disastrous fight”? That's better than painting the thing merely to pique Maisie. I can do it now because I have it inside me. Binkie, I'm going to hold you up by your tail. You're an omen. Come here.'

Binkie swung head downward for a moment without speaking.

'Rather like holding a guinea-pig; but you're a brave little dog, and you don't yelp when you're hung up. It is an omen.'

Binkie went to his own chair, and as often as he looked saw Dick walking up and down, rubbing his hands and chuckling. That night Dick wrote a letter to Maisie full of the tenderest regard for her health, but saying very little about his own, and dreamed of the Melancolia to be born. Not till morning did he remember that something might happen to him in the future.

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He fell to work, whistling softly, and was swallowed up in the clean, clear joy of creation, which does not come to man too often, lest he should consider himself the equal of his God, and so refuse to die at the appointed time. He forgot Maisie, Torpenhow, and Binkie at his feet, but remembered to stir Bessie, who needed very little stirring, into a tremendous rage, that he might watch the smouldering lights in her eyes. He threw himself without reservation into his work, and did not think of the doom that was to overtake him, for he was possessed with his notion, and the things of this world had no power upon him.

‘You’re pleased to-day,’ said Bessie.

Dick waved his mahl-stick in mystic circles and went to the sideboard for a drink. In the evening, when the exaltation of the day had died down, he went to the sideboard again, and after some visits became convinced that the eye-doctor was a liar, since he still could see everything very clearly. He was of opinion that he would even make a home for Maisie, and that whether she liked it or not she should be his wife. The mood passed next morning, but the sideboard and all upon it remained for his comfort. Again he set to work, and his eyes troubled him with spots and dashes and blurs till he had taken counsel with the sideboard, and the Melancholia both on the canvas and in his own

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mind appeared lovelier than ever. There was a delightful sense of irresponsibility upon him, such as they feel who walking among their fellow-men know that the death-sentence of disease is upon them, and, since fear is but waste of the little time left, are riotously happy. The days passed without event. Bessie arrived punctually always, and, though her voice seemed to Dick to come from a distance, her face was always very near, and the Melancolia began to flame on the canvas, in the likeness of a woman who had known all the sorrow in the world and was laughing at it. It was true that the corners of the studio draped themselves in gray film and retired into the darkness, that the spots in his eyes and the pains across his head were very troublesome, and that Maisie's letters were hard to read and harder still to answer. He could not tell her of his trouble, and he could not laugh at her accounts of her own Melancolia which was always going to be finished. But the furious days of toil and the nights of wild dreams made amends for all, and the sideboard was his best friend on earth. Bessie was singularly dull. She used to shriek with rage when Dick stared at her between half-closed eyes. Now she sulked, or watched him with disgust, saying very little.

Torpenhow had been absent for six weeks. An incoherent note heralded his return. 'News! great

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news!' he wrote. 'The Nilghai knows, and so does the Keneu. We're all back on Thursday. Get lunch and clean your accoutrements.'

Dick showed Bessie the letter, and she abused him for that he had ever sent Torpenhow away and ruined her life.

'Well,' said Dick brutally, 'you're better as you are, instead of making love to some drunken beast in the street.' He felt that he had rescued Torpenhow from great temptation.

'I don't know if that's any worse than sitting to a drunken beast in a studio. *You* haven't been sober for three weeks. You've been soaking the whole time; and yet you pretend you're better than me!'

'What d'you mean?' said Dick.

'Mean! You'll see when Mr. Torpenhow comes back.'

It was not long to wait. Torpenhow met Bessie on the staircase without a sign of feeling. He had news that was more to him than many Bessies, and the Keneu and the Nilghai were trampling behind him, calling for Dick.

'Drinking like a fish,' Bessie whispered. 'He's been at it for nearly a month.' She followed the men stealthily to hear judgment done.

They came into the studio, rejoicing, to be welcomed over-effusively by a drawn, lined, shrunken,

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haggard wreck,—unshaven, blue-white about the nostrils, stooping in the shoulders, and peering under his eyebrows nervously. The drink had been at work as steadily as Dick.

‘Is this you?’ said Torpenhow.

‘All that’s left of me. Sit down. Binkie’s quite well, and I’ve been doing some good work.’ He reeled where he stood.

‘You’ve done some of the worst work you’ve ever done in your life. Man alive, you’re——’

Torpenhow turned to his companions appealingly, and they left the room to find lunch elsewhere. Then he spoke; but, since the reproof of a friend is much too sacred and intimate a thing to be printed, and since Torpenhow used figures and metaphors which were unseemly, and contempt untranslatable, it will never be known what was actually said to Dick, who blinked and winked and picked at his hands. After a time the culprit began to feel the need of a little self-respect. He was quite sure that he had not in any way departed from virtue, and there were reasons, too, of which Torpenhow knew nothing. He would explain.

He rose, tried to straighten his shoulders, and spoke to the face he could hardly see.

‘You are right,’ he said. ‘But I am right, too. After you went away I had some trouble with my eyes. So I went to an oculist, and he turned a

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gasogene—I mean a gas-engine—into my eye. That was very long ago. He said, “Scar on the head,—sword-cut and optic nerve.” Make a note of that. So I am going blind. I have some work to do before I go blind, and I suppose that I must do it. I cannot see much now, but I can see best when I am drunk. I did not know I was drunk till I was told, but I must go on with my work. If you want to see it, there it is.’ He pointed to the all but finished *Melancolia* and looked for applause.

Torpenhow said nothing, and Dick began to whimper feebly, for joy at seeing Torpenhow again, for grief at misdeeds—if indeed they were misdeeds—that made Torpenhow remote and unsympathetic, and for childish vanity hurt, since Torpenhow had not given a word of praise to his wonderful picture.

Bessie looked through the keyhole after a long pause, and saw the two walking up and down as usual, Torpenhow’s hand on Dick’s shoulder. Hereat she said something so improper that it shocked even Binkie, who was dribbling patiently on the landing with the hope of seeing his master again.

CHAPTER XI

The lark will make her hymn to God,
The partridge call her brood,
While I forget the heath I trod,
The fields wherein I stood,
'Tis dule to know not night from morn,
But deeper dule to know
I can but hear the hunter's horn
That once I used to blow.

The Only Son.

IT was the third day after Torpenhow's return, and his heart was heavy.

'Do you mean to tell me that you can't see to work without whisky? It's generally the other way about.'

'Can a drunkard swear on his honour?' said Dick.

'Yes, if he has been as good a man as you.'

'Then I give you my word of honour,' said Dick, speaking hurriedly through parched lips. 'Old man, I can hardly see your face now. You've kept me sober for two days,—if I ever was drunk,

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—and I've done no work. Don't keep me back any more. I don't know when my eyes may give out. The spots and dots and the pains and things are crowding worse than ever. I swear I can see all right when I'm—when I'm moderately screwed, as you say. Give me three more sittings from Bessie and all the—stuff I want, and the picture will be done. I can't kill myself in three days. It only means a touch of D. T. at the worst.'

'If I give you three days more will you promise me to stop work and—the other thing, whether the picture's finished or not?'

'I can't. You don't know what that picture means to me. But surely you could get the Nilghai to help you, and knock me down and tie me up. I shouldn't fight for the whisky, but I should for the work.'

'Go on, then. I give you three days; but you're nearly breaking my heart.'

Dick returned to his work, toiling as one possessed; and the yellow devil of whisky stood by him and chased away the spots in his eyes. The Melancolia was nearly finished, and was all or nearly all that he had hoped she would be. Dick jested with Bessie, who reminded him that he was 'a drunken beast'; but the reproof did not move him.

'You can't understand, Bess. We are in sight

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of land now, and soon we shall lie back and think about what we've done. I'll give you three months' pay when the picture's finished, and next time I have any more work in hand—but that doesn't matter. Won't three months' pay make you hate me less?'

'No, it won't! I hate you, and I'll go on hating you. Mr. Torpenhow won't speak to me any more. He's always looking at map-things and red-backed books.'

Bessie did not say that she had again laid siege to Torpenhow, or that he had at the end of her passionate pleading picked her up, given her a kiss, and put her outside the door with a recommendation not to be a little fool. He spent most of his time in the company of the Nilghai, and their talk was of war in the near future, the hiring of transports, and secret preparations among the dockyards. He did not care to see Dick till the picture was finished.

'He's doing first-class work,' he said to the Nilghai, 'and it's quite out of his regular line. But, for the matter of that, so's his infernal drinking.'

'Never mind. Leave him alone. When he has come to his senses again we'll carry him off from this place and let him breathe clean air. Poor Dick! I don't envy you, Torp, when his eyes fail.'

'Yes, it will be a case of "God help the man

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who's chained to our Davie." The worst is that we don't know when it will happen; and I believe the uncertainty and the waiting have sent Dick to the whisky more than anything else.'

'How the Arab who cut his head open would grin if he knew!'

'He's at perfect liberty to grin if he can. He's dead. That's poor consolation now.'

In the afternoon of the third day Torpenhow heard Dick calling for him. 'All finished!' he shouted. 'I've done it! Come in! Isn't she a beauty? Isn't she a darling? I've been down to hell to get her; but isn't she worth it?'

Torpenhow looked at the head of a woman who laughed,—a full-lipped, hollow-eyed woman who laughed from out of the canvas as Dick had intended she should.

'Who taught you how to do it?' said Torpenhow. 'The touch and notion have nothing to do with your regular work. What a face it is! What eyes, and what insolence!' Unconsciously he threw back his head and laughed with her. 'She's seen the game played out,—I don't think she had a good time of it,—and now she doesn't care. Isn't that the idea?'

'Exactly.'

'Where did you get the mouth and chin from? They don't belong to Bess.'

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‘They’re—some one else’s. But isn’t it good? Isn’t it thundering good? Wasn’t it worth the whisky? I did it. Alone I did it, and it’s the best I can do.’ He drew his breath sharply, and whispered, ‘Just God! what could I not do ten years hence, if I can do this now!—By the way, what do you think of it, Bess?’

The girl was biting her lips. She loathed Torpenhow because he had taken no notice of her.

‘I think it’s just the horriddest, beastliest thing I ever saw,’ she answered, and turned away.

‘More than you will be of that way of thinking, young woman.—Dick, there’s a sort of murderous, viperine suggestion in the poise of the head that I don’t understand,’ said Torpenhow.

‘That’s trick-work,’ said Dick, chuckling with delight of being completely understood. ‘I couldn’t resist one little bit of sheer swagger. It’s a French trick, and you wouldn’t understand; but it’s got at by slewing round the head a trifle, and a tiny, tiny foreshortening of one side of the face from the angle of the chin to the top of the left ear. That, and deepening the shadow under the lobe of the ear. It was flagrant trick-work; but, having the notion fixed, I felt entitled to play with it.—Oh, you beauty!’

‘Amen! She is a beauty. I can feel it.’

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‘So will every man who has any sorrow of his own,’ said Dick, slapping his thigh. ‘He shall see his trouble there, and, by the Lord Harry, just when he’s feeling properly sorry for himself he shall throw back his head and laugh,—as she is laughing. I’ve put the life of my heart and the light of my eyes into her, and I don’t care what comes. . . . I’m tired,—awfully tired. I think I’ll get to sleep. Take away the whisky, it has served its turn, and give Bessie thirty-six quid, and three over for luck. Cover the picture.’

He dropped asleep in the long chair, his face white and haggard, almost before he had finished the sentence. Bessie tried to take Torpenhow’s hand. ‘Aren’t you never going to speak to me any more?’ she said; but Torpenhow was looking at Dick.

‘What a stock of vanity the man has! I’ll take him in hand to-morrow and make much of him. He deserves it.—Eh! what was that, Bess?’

‘Nothing. I’ll put things tidy here a little, and then I’ll go. You couldn’t give me that three months’ pay now, could you? He said you were to.’

Torpenhow gave her a check and went to his own rooms. Bessie faithfully tidied up the studio, set the door ajar for flight, emptied half a bottle of turpentine on a duster, and began to scrub the

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face of the Melancolia viciously. The paint did not smudge quickly enough. She took a palette-knife and scraped, following each stroke with the wet duster. In five minutes the picture was a formless, scarred muddle of colours. She threw the paint-stained duster into the studio stove, stuck out her tongue at the sleeper, and whispered, 'Bilked!' as she turned to run down the staircase. She would never see Torpenhow any more, but she had at least done harm to the man who had come between her and her desire and who used to make fun of her. Cashing the check was the very cream of the jest to Bessie. Then the little privateer sailed across the Thames, to be swallowed up in the gray wilderness of South-the-water.

Dick slept till late into the evening, when Torpenhow dragged him off to bed. His eyes were as bright as his voice was hoarse. 'Let's have another look at the picture,' he said, insistently as a child.

'You—go—to—bed,' said Torpenhow. 'You aren't at all well, though you mayn't know it. You're as jumpy as a cat.'

'I reform to-morrow. Good-night.'

As he repassed through the studio, Torpenhow lifted the cloth above the picture, and almost betrayed himself by outcries: 'Wiped out!—scraped out and turped out! If Dick knows this

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to-night he'll go perfectly mad. He's on the verge of jumps as it is. That's Bess,—the little fiend! Only a woman could have done that!—with the ink not dry on the check, too! Dick will be raving mad to-morrow. It was all my fault for trying to help gutter-devils. Oh, my poor Dick, the Lord is hitting you very hard!'

Dick could not sleep that night, partly for pure joy, and partly because the well-known Catherine-wheels inside his eyes had given place to crackling volcanoes of many-coloured fire. 'Spout away,' he said aloud. 'I've done my work, and now you can do what you please.' He lay still, staring at the ceiling, the long-pent-up delirium of drink in his veins, his brain on fire with racing thoughts that would not stay to be considered, and his hands crisped and dry. He had just discovered that he was painting the face of the Melancholia on a revolving dome ribbed with millions of lights, and that all his wondrous thoughts stood embodied hundreds of feet below his tiny swinging plank, shouting together in his honour, when something cracked inside his temples like an overstrained bowstring, the glittering dome broke inward, and he was alone in the thick night.

'I'll go to sleep. The room's very dark. Let's light a lamp and see how the Melancholia looks. There ought to have been a moon.'

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It was then that Torpenhow heard his name called by a voice that he did not know,—in the rattling accents of deadly fear.

‘He’s looked at the picture,’ was his first thought, as he hurried into the bedroom and found Dick sitting up and beating the air with his hands.

‘Torp! Torp! Where are you? For pity’s sake, come to me!’

‘What’s the matter?’

Dick clutched at his shoulder. ‘Matter! I’ve been lying here for hours in the dark, and you never heard me. Torp, old man, don’t go away. I’m all in the dark. In the dark, I tell you!’

Torpenhow held the candle within a foot of Dick’s eyes, but there was no light in those eyes. He lit the gas, and Dick heard the flame catch. The grip of his fingers on Torpenhow’s shoulder made Torpenhow wince.

‘Don’t leave me. You wouldn’t leave me alone now, would you? I can’t see. D’you understand? It’s black,—quite black,—and I feel as if I was falling through it all.’

‘Steady does it.’ Torpenhow put his arm round Dick and began to rock him gently to and fro.

‘That’s good. Now don’t talk. If I keep very quiet for a while this darkness will lift. It

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seems just on the point of breaking. H'sh!' Dick knit his brows and stared desperately in front of him. The night air was chilling Torpenhow's toes.

'Can you stay like that a minute?' he said. 'I'll get my dressing-gown and some slippers.'

Dick clutched the bed-head with both hands and waited for the darkness to clear away. 'What a time you've been!' he cried, when Torpenhow returned. 'It's as black as ever. What are you banging about in the doorway?'

'Long chair,—horse-blanket,—pillow. Going to sleep by you. Lie down now; you'll be better in the morning.'

'I shan't!' The voice rose to a wail. 'My God! I'm blind! I'm blind, and the darkness will never go away.' He made as if to leap from the bed, but Torpenhow's arms were round him, and Torpenhow's chin was on his shoulder, and his breath was squeezed out of him. He could only gasp, 'Blind!' and wriggle feebly.

'Steady, Dickie, steady!' said the deep voice in his ear, and the grip tightened. 'Bite on the bullet, old man, and don't let them think you're afraid.' The grip could draw no closer. Both men were breathing heavily. Dick threw his head from side to side and groaned.

'Let me go,' he panted. 'You're cracking

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my ribs. We—we mustn't let them think we're afraid, must we,—all the powers of darkness and that lot?'

'Lie down. It's all over now.'

'Yes,' said Dick obediently. 'But would you mind letting me hold your hand? I feel as if I wanted something to hold on to. One drops through the dark so.'

Torpenhow thrust out a large and hairy paw from the long chair. Dick clutched it tightly, and in half an hour had fallen asleep. Torpenhow withdrew his hand, and, stooping over Dick, kissed him lightly on the forehead, as men do sometimes kiss a wounded comrade in the hour of death, to ease his departure.

In the gray dawn Torpenhow heard Dick talking to himself. He was adrift on the shoreless tides of delirium, speaking very quickly—

'It's a pity,—a great pity; but it's helped, and it must be eaten, Master George. Sufficient unto the day is the blindness thereof, and, further, putting aside all Melancolias and false humours, it is of obvious notoriety—such as mine was—that the queen can do no wrong. Torp doesn't know that. I'll tell him when we're a little farther into the desert. What a bungle those boatmen are making of the steamer-ropes! They'll have that four-inch hawser chafed through in a minute.



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I told you so—there she goes! White foam on green water, and the steamer slewing round. How good that looks! I'll sketch it. No, I can't. I'm afflicted with ophthalmia. That was one of the ten plagues of Egypt, and it extends up the Nile in the shape of cataract. Ha! that's a joke, Torp. Laugh, you graven image, and stand clear of the hawser. . . . It'll knock you into the water and make your dress all dirty, Maisie dear.'

'Oh!' said Torpenhow. 'This happened before. That night on the river.'

'She'll be sure to say it's my fault if you get muddy, and you're quite near enough to the break-water. Maisie, that's not fair. Ah! I knew you'd miss. Low and to the left, dear. But you've no conviction. Everything in the world except conviction. Don't be angry, darling. I'd cut my hand off if it would give you anything more than obstinacy. My right hand, if it would serve.'

'Now we mustn't listen. Here's an island shouting across seas of misunderstanding with a vengeance. But it's shouting truth, I fancy,' said Torpenhow.

The babble continued. It all bore upon Maisie. Sometimes Dick lectured at length on his craft, then he cursed himself for his folly in being enslaved. He pleaded to Maisie for a kiss—only

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one kiss—before she went away, and called to her to come back from Vitry-sur-Marne, if she would; but through all his ravings he bade heaven and earth witness that the queen could do no wrong.

Torpenhow listened attentively, and learned every detail of Dick's life that had been hidden from him. For three days Dick raved through his past, and then slept a natural sleep. 'What a strain he has been running under, poor chap!' said Torpenhow. 'Dick, of all men, handing himself over like a dog! And I was lecturing him on arrogance! I ought to have known that it was no use to judge a man. But I did it. What a demon that girl must be! Dick's given her his life,—confound him!—and she's given him one kiss apparently.'

'Torp,' said Dick from the bed, 'go out for a walk. You've been here too long. I'll get up. Hi! This is annoying. I can't dress myself. Oh, it's too absurd!'

Torpenhow helped him into his clothes and led him to the big chair in the studio. He sat quietly waiting under strained nerves for the darkness to lift. It did not lift that day, nor the next. Dick adventured on a voyage round the walls. He hit his shins against the stove, and this suggested to him that it would be better to crawl on all-fours,

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one hand in front of him. Torpenhow found him on the floor.

‘I’m trying to get the geography of my new possessions,’ said he. ‘D’you remember that nigger you gouged in the square? Pity you didn’t keep the odd eye. It would have been useful. Any letters for me? Give me all the ones in fat gray envelopes with a sort of crown thing outside. They’re of no importance.’

Torpenhow gave him a letter with a black M. on the envelope flap. Dick put it into his pocket. There was nothing in it that Torpenhow might not have read, but it belonged to himself and to Maisie, who would never belong to him.

‘When she finds that I don’t write she’ll stop writing. It’s better so. I couldn’t be any use to her now,’ Dick argued, and the tempter suggested that he should make known his condition. Every nerve in him revolted. ‘I have fallen low enough already. I’m not going to beg for pity. Besides, it would be cruel to her.’ He strove to put Maisie out of his thoughts; but the blind have many opportunities for thinking, and as the tides of his strength came back to him in the long employless days of dead darkness, Dick’s soul was troubled to the core. Another letter, and another, came from Maisie. Then there was silence, and Dick sat by the window, the pulse of summer in

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the air, and pictured her being won by another man, stronger than himself. His imagination, the keener for the dark background it worked against, spared him no single detail that might send him raging up and down the studio, to stumble over the stove that seemed to be in four places at once. Worst of all, tobacco would not taste in the darkness. The arrogance of the man had disappeared, and in its place were settled despair that Torpenhow knew, and blind passion that Dick confided to his pillow at night. The intervals between the paroxysms were filled with intolerable waiting and the weight of intolerable darkness.

‘Come out into the Park,’ said Torpenhow. ‘You haven’t stirred out since the beginning of things.’

‘What’s the use? There’s no movement in the dark; and, besides,’—he paused irresolutely at the head of the stairs,—‘something will run over me.’

‘Not if I’m with you. Proceed gingerly.’

The roar of the streets filled Dick with nervous terror, and he clung to Torpenhow’s arm. ‘Fancy having to feel for a gutter with your foot!’ he said petulantly, as he turned into the Park. ‘Let’s curse God and die.’

‘Sentries are forbidden to pay unauthorised compliments. By Jove, there are the Guards!’

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Dick's figure straightened. 'Let's get near 'em. Let's go in and look. Let's get on the grass and run. I can smell the trees.'

'Mind the low railing. That's all right!' Torpenhow kicked out a tuft of grass with his heel. 'Smell that,' he said. 'Isn't it good?' Dick snuffed luxuriously. 'Now pick up your feet and run.' They approached as near to the regiment as was possible. The clank of bayonets being unfixed made Dick's nostrils quiver.

'Let's get nearer. They're in column, aren't they?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Felt it. Oh, my men!—my beautiful men!' He edged forward as though he could see. 'I could draw those chaps once. Who'll draw 'em now?'

'They'll move off in a minute. Don't jump when the band begins.'

'Huh! I'm not a new charger. It's the silences that hurt. Nearer, Torp!—nearer! Oh, my God, what wouldn't I give to see 'em for a minute!—one half minute!'

He could hear the armed life almost within reach of him, could hear the slings tighten across the bandsman's chest as he heaved the big drum from the ground.

'Sticks crossed above his head,' whispered Torpenhow.

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‘I know. I know! Who should know if I don’t? H’sh!’

The drumsticks fell with a boom, and the men swung forward to the crash of the band. Dick felt the wind of the massed movement in his face, heard the maddening tramp of feet and the friction of the pouches on the belts. The big drum pounded out the tune. It was a music-hall refrain that made a perfect quickstep—

He must be a man of decent height,
He must be a man of weight,
He must come home on a Saturday night
In a thoroughly sober state;
He must know how to love me,
And he must know how to kiss;
And if he’s enough to keep us both
I can’t refuse him bliss.

‘What’s the matter?’ said Torpenhow, as he saw Dick’s head fall when the last of the regiment had departed.

‘Nothing. I feel a little bit out of the running,—that’s all. Torp, take me back. Why did you bring me out?’

CHAPTER XII

There were three friends that buried the fourth,
The mould in his mouth and the dust in his eyes;
And they went south, and east, and north,—
The strong man fights, but the sick man dies.

There were three friends that spoke of the dead,—
The strong man fights, but the sick man dies.—
'And would he were here with us now,' they said,
'The sun in our face and the wind in our eyes.'

Ballad.

THE Nilghai was angry with Torpenhow. Dick had been sent to bed,—blind men are ever under the orders of those who can see,—and since he had returned from the Park had fluently sworn at Torpenhow because he was alive, and all the world because it was alive and could see, while he, Dick, was dead in the death of the blind, who, at the best, are only burdens upon their associates. Torpenhow had said something about a Mrs. Gummidge, and Dick had retired in

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a black fury to handle and rehandle three unopened letters from Maisie.

The Nilghai, fat, burly, and aggressive, was in Torpenhow's rooms. Behind him sat the Keneu, the Great War Eagle, and between them lay a large map embellished with black and white-headed pins.

'I was wrong about the Balkans,' said the Nilghai. 'But I'm not wrong about this business. The whole of our work in the Southern Soudan must be done over again. The public doesn't care, of course, but the Government does, and they are making their arrangements quietly. You know that as well as I do.'

'I remember how the people cursed us when our troops withdrew from Omdurman. It was bound to crop up sooner or later. But I can't go,' said Torpenhow. He pointed through the open door; it was a hot night. 'Can you blame me?'

The Keneu purred above his pipe like a large and very happy cat—

'Don't blame you in the least. It's uncommonly good of you, and all the rest of it, but every man—even you, Torp—must consider his work. I know it sounds brutal, but Dick's out of the race,—down,—*gastados*, expended, finished, done for. He has a little money of his own. He won't starve, and you can't pull out of your slide for his sake. Think of your own reputation.'

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‘Dick’s was five times bigger than mine and yours put together.’

‘That was because he signed his name to everything he did. It’s all ended now. You must hold yourself in readiness to move out. You can command your own prices, and you do better work than any three of us.’

‘Don’t tell me how tempting it is. I’ll stay here to look after Dick for a while. He’s as cheerful as a bear with a sore head, but I think he likes to have me near him.’

The Nilghai said something uncomplimentary about soft-headed fools who throw away their careers for other fools. Torpenhow flushed angrily. The constant strain of attendance on Dick had worn his nerves thin.

‘There remains a third fate,’ said the Keneu thoughtfully. ‘Consider this, and be not larger fools than is necessary. Dick is—or rather was—an able-bodied man of moderate attractions and a certain amount of audacity.’

‘Oho!’ said the Nilghai, who remembered an affair at Cairo. ‘I begin to see.—Torp, I’m sorry.’

Torpenhow nodded forgiveness: ‘You were more sorry when he cut you out, though.—Go on, Keneu.’

‘I’ve often thought, when I’ve seen men die out in the desert, that if the news could be sent

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through the world, and the means of transport were quick enough, there would be one woman at least at each man's bedside.'

'There would be some mighty quaint revelations. Let us be grateful things are as they are,' said the Nilghai.

'Let us rather reverently consider whether Torp's three-cornered ministrations are exactly what Dick needs just now.—What do you think yourself, Torp?'

'I know they aren't. But what can I do?'

'Lay the matter before the Board. We are all Dick's friends here. You've been most in his life.'

'But I picked it up when he was off his head.'

'The greater chance of its being true. I thought we should arrive. Who is she?'

Then Torpenhow told a tale in plain words, as a special correspondent who knows how to make a verbal *précis* should tell it. The men listened without interruption.

'Is it possible that a man can come back across the years to his calf-love?' said the Keneu. 'Is it possible?'

'I give the facts. He says nothing about it now, but he sits fumbling three letters from her when he thinks I'm not looking. What am I to do?'

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‘Speak to him,’ said the Nilghai.

‘Oh yes! Write to her.—I don’t know her full name, remember,—and ask her to accept him out of pity. I believe you once told Dick you were sorry for him, Nilghai. You remember what happened, eh? Go into the bedroom and suggest full confession and an appeal to this Maisie girl, whoever she is. I honestly believe he’d try to kill you; and the blindness has made him rather muscular.’

‘Torpenhow’s course is perfectly clear,’ said the Keneu. ‘He will go to Vitry-sur-Marne, which is on the Bézières-Landes Railway,—single track from Tourgas. The Prussians shelled it out in ’70 because there was a poplar on the top of a hill eighteen hundred yards from the church spire. There’s a squadron of cavalry quartered there,—or ought to be. Where this studio Torp spoke about may be I cannot tell. That is Torp’s business. I have given him his route. He will dispassionately explain the situation to the girl, and she will come back to Dick,—the more especially because, to use Dick’s words, “there is nothing but her damned obstinacy to keep them apart.”’

‘And they have four hundred and twenty pounds a year between ’em. Dick never lost his head for figures, even in his delirium. You

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haven't the shadow of an excuse for not going,' said the Nilghai.

Torpenhow looked very uncomfortable. 'But it's absurd and impossible. I can't drag her back by the hair.'

'Our business—the business for which we draw our money—is to do absurd and impossible things,—generally with no reason whatever except to amuse the public. Here we have a reason. The rest doesn't matter. I shall share these rooms with the Nilghai till Torpenhow returns. There will be a batch of unbridled "specials" coming to town in a little while, and these will serve as their headquarters. Another reason for sending Torpenhow away. Thus Providence helps those who help others, and'—here the Keneu dropped his measured speech—'we can't have you tied by the leg to Dick when the trouble begins. It's your only chance of getting away; and Dick will be grateful.'

'He will,—worse luck! I can but go and try. I can't conceive a woman in her senses refusing Dick.'

'Talk that out with the girl. I have seen you wheedle an angry Mahdieh woman into giving you dates. This won't be a tithe as difficult. You had better not be here to-morrow afternoon, because the Nilghai and I will be in possession. It is an order. Obey.'

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‘Dick,’ said Torpenhow next morning, ‘can I do anything for you?’

‘No! Leave me alone. How often must I remind you that I’m blind?’

‘Nothing I could go for to fetch for to carry for to bring?’

‘No. Take those infernal creaking boots of yours away.’

‘Poor chap!’ said Torpenhow to himself. ‘I must have been sitting on his nerves lately. He wants a lighter step.’ Then, aloud, ‘Very well. Since you’re so independent I’m going off for four or five days. Say good-bye at least. The housekeeper will look after you, and Keneu has my rooms.’

Dick’s face fell. ‘You won’t be longer than a week at the outside? I know I’m touched in the temper, but I can’t get on without you.’

‘Can’t you? You’ll have to do without me in a little time, and you’ll be glad I’m gone.’

Dick felt his way back to the big chair, and wondered what these things might mean. He did not wish to be tended by the housekeeper, and yet Torpenhow’s constant tendernesses jarred on him. He did not exactly know what he wanted. The darkness would not lift, and Maisie’s unopened letters felt worn and old from much handling. He could never read them for himself as long as

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life endured; but Maisie might have sent him some fresh ones to play with. The Nilghai entered with a gift,—a piece of red modelling-wax. He fancied that Dick might find interest in using his hands. Dick poked and patted the stuff for a few minutes, and, 'Is it like anything in the world?' he said drearily. 'Take it away. I may get the touch of the blind in fifty years. Do you know where Torpenhow has gone?'

The Nilghai knew nothing. 'We're staying in his rooms till he comes back. Can we do anything for you?'

'I'd like to be left alone, please. Don't think I'm ungrateful; but I'm best alone.'

The Nilghai chuckled, and Dick resumed his drowsy brooding and sullen rebellion against fate. He had long since ceased to think about the work he had done in the old days, and the desire to do more work had departed from him. He was exceedingly sorry for himself, and the completeness of his tender grief soothed him. But his soul and his body cried for Maisie,—Maisie who would understand. His mind pointed out that Maisie, having her own work to do, would not care. His experience had taught him that when money was exhausted women went away, and that when a man was knocked out of the race the others trampled on him. 'Then at the least,' said Dick,

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in reply, 'she could use me as I used Binat,—for some sort of a study. I wouldn't ask more than to be near her again, even though I knew that another man was making love to her. Ugh! what a dog I am!'

A voice on the staircase began to sing joyfully—

When we go—go—go away from here,

Our creditors will weep and they will wail,

Our absence much regretting when they find that we've been
getting

Out of England by next Tuesday's Indian mail.

Following the trampling of feet, slamming of Torpenhow's door, and the sound of voices in strenuous debate, some one squeaked, 'And see, you good fellows, I have found a new water-bottle,—firs'-class patent—eh, how you say? Open himself inside out.'

Dick sprang to his feet. He knew the voice well. 'That's Cassavetti, come back from the Continent. Now I know why Torp went away. There's a row somewhere, and—I'm out of it!'

The Nilghai commanded silence in vain. 'That's for my sake,' Dick said bitterly. 'The birds are getting ready to fly, and they wouldn't tell me. I can hear Morten-Sutherland and Mackaye. Half the War Correspondents in London are there;—and I'm out of it.'

He stumbled across the landing and plunged

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into Torpenhow's room. He could feel that it was full of men. 'Where's the trouble?' said he. 'In the Balkans at last? Why didn't some one tell me?'

'We thought you wouldn't be interested,' said the Nilghai shamefacedly. 'It's in the Soudan, as usual.'

'You lucky dogs! Let me sit here while you talk. I shan't be a skeleton at the feast.—Cassavetti, where are you? Your English is as bad as ever.'

Dick was led into a chair. He heard the rustle of the maps, and the talk swept forward, carrying him with it. Everybody spoke at once, discussing press censorships, railway-routes, transport, water-supply, the capacities of generals,—these in language that would have horrified a trusting public,—ranting, asserting, denouncing, and laughing at the top of their voices. There was the glorious certainty of war in the Soudan at any moment. The Nilghai said so, and it was well to be in readiness. The Keneu had telegraphed to Cairo for horses; Cassavetti had stolen a perfectly inaccurate list of troops that would be ordered forward, and was reading it out amid profane interruptions, and the Keneu introduced to Dick some man unknown who would be employed as war artist by the Central Southern Syndicate.

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‘It’s his first outing,’ said the Keneu. ‘Give him some tips—about riding camels.’

‘Oh, those camels!’ groaned Cassavetti. ‘I shall learn to ride him again, and now I am so much all soft! Listen, you good fellows. I know your military arrangement very well. There will go the Royal Argalshire Sutherlanders. So it was read to me upon best authority.’

A roar of laughter interrupted him.

‘Sit down,’ said the Nilghai. ‘The lists aren’t even made out in the War Office.’

‘Will there be any force at Suakin?’ said a voice.

Then the outcries redoubled, and grew mixed, thus: ‘How many Egyptian troops will they use?—God help the Fellaheen!—There’s a railway in Plumstead marshes doing duty as a fives-court.—We shall have the Suakin-Berber line built at last.—Canadian voyageurs are too careful. Give me a half-drunk Krooman in a whale-boat.—Who commands the Desert column?—No, they never blew up the big rock in the Ghizeh bend. We shall have to be hauled up, as usual.—Somebody tell me if there’s an Indian contingent, or I’ll break everybody’s head.—Don’t tear the map in two.—It’s a war of occupation, I tell you, to connect with the African Companies in the South.—There’s guinea-worm in most of the wells on

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that route.' Then the Nilghai, despairing of peace, bellowed like a fog-horn and beat upon the table with both hands.

'But what becomes of Torpenhow?' said Dick, in the silence that followed.

'Torp's in abeyance just now. He's off love-making somewhere, I suppose,' said the Nilghai.

'He said he was going to stay at home,' said the Keneu.

'Is he?' said Dick with an oath. 'He won't. I'm not much good now, but if you and the Nilghai hold him down I'll engage to trample on him till he sees reason. He stay behind, indeed! He's the best of you all. There'll be some tough work by Omdurman. We shall come there to stay, this time. But I forgot. I wish I were going with you.'

'So do we all, Dickie,' said the Keneu.

'And I most of all,' said the new artist of the Central Southern Syndicate. 'Could you tell me——'

'I'll give you one piece of advice,' Dick answered, moving towards the door. 'If you happen to be cut over the head in a scrimmage, don't guard. Tell the man to go on cutting. You'll find it cheapest in the end. Thanks for letting me look in.'

'There's grit in Dick,' said the Nilghai, an

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hour later, when the room was emptied of all save the Keneu.

‘It was the sacred call of the war-trumpet. Did you notice how he answered to it? Poor fellow! Let’s look at him,’ said the Keneu.

The excitement of the talk had died away. Dick was sitting by the studio table, with his head on his arms, when the men came in. He did not change his position.

‘It hurts,’ he moaned. ‘God forgive me, but it hurts cruelly; and yet, y’know, the world has a knack of spinning round all by itself. Shall I see Torp before he goes?’

‘Oh yes. You’ll see him,’ said the Nilghai.

CHAPTER XIII

The sun went down an hour ago,
I wonder if I face towards home,
If I lost my way in the light of day
How shall I find it now night is come?

Old Song.

‘**M**AISIE, come to bed.’
‘It’s so hot I can’t sleep. Don’t worry.’

Maisie put her elbows on the window-sill and looked at the moonlight on the straight, poplar-flanked road. Summer had come upon Virty-sur-Marne and parched it to the bone. The grass was dry-burnt in the meadows, the clay by the bank of the river was caked to brick, the roadside flowers were long since dead, and the roses in the garden hung withered on their stalks. The heat in the little low bedroom under the eaves was almost intolerable. The very moonlight on the wall of Kami’s studio across the road seemed to make the night hotter, and the shadow of the big bell-handle

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by the closed gate cast a bar of inky black that caught Maisie's eye and annoyed her.

'Horrid thing! It should be all white,' she murmured. 'And the gate isn't in the middle of the wall, either. I never noticed that before.'

Maisie was hard to please at that hour. First, the heat of the past few weeks had worn her down; secondly, her work, and particularly the study of a female head intended to represent the Melancholia and not finished in time for the Salon, was unsatisfactory; thirdly, Kami had said as much two days before; fourthly,—but so completely fourthly that it was hardly worth thinking about,—Dick, her property, had not written to her for more than six weeks. She was angry with the heat, with Kami, and with her work, but she was exceedingly angry with Dick.

She had written to him three times,—each time proposing a fresh treatment of her Melancholia. Dick had taken no notice of these communications. She had resolved to write no more. When she returned to England in the autumn—for her pride's sake she could not return earlier—she would speak to him. She missed the Sunday afternoon conferences more than she cared to admit. All that Kami said was, '*Continuez, mademoiselle, continuez toujours,*' and he had been repeating his wearisome counsel through the hot summer,

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exactly like a cicala,—an old gray cicala in a black alpaca coat, white trousers, and a huge felt hat. But Dick had tramped masterfully up and down her little studio north of the cool green London park, and had said things ten times worse than *continuez*, before he snatched the brush out of her hand and showed her where her error lay. His last letter, Maisie remembered, contained some trivial advice about not sketching in the sun or drinking water at wayside farmhouses; and he had said that not once, but three times,—as if he did not know that Maisie could take care of herself.

But what was he doing, that he could not trouble to write? A murmur of voices in the road made her lean from the window. A cavalryman of the little garrison in the town was talking to Kami's cook. The moonlight glittered on the scabbard of his sabre, which he was holding in his hand lest it should clank inopportunately. The cook's cap cast deep shadows on her face, which was close to the conscript's. He slid his arm round her waist, and there followed the sound of a kiss.

'Faugh!' said Maisie, stepping back.

'What's that?' said the red-haired girl, who was tossing uneasily outside her bed.

'Only a conscript kissing the cook,' said Maisie.

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‘They’ve gone away now.’ She leaned out of the window again, and put a shawl over her nightgown to guard against chills. There was a very small night-breeze abroad, and a sun-baked rose below nodded its head as one who knew unutterable secrets. Was it possible that Dick should turn his thoughts from her work and his own and descend to the degradation of Suzanne and the conscript? He could not! The rose nodded its head and one leaf therewith. It looked like a naughty little devil scratching its ear. Dick could not, ‘because,’ thought Maisie, ‘he is mine,—mine,—mine. He said he was. I’m sure I don’t care what he does. It will only spoil his work if he does; and it will spoil mine too.’

The rose continued to nod in the futile way peculiar to flowers. There was no earthly reason why Dick should not disport himself as he chose, except that he was called by Providence, which was Maisie, to assist Maisie in her work. And her work was the preparation of pictures that went sometimes to English provincial exhibitions, as the notices in the scrap-book proved, and that were invariably rejected by the Salon when Kami was plagued into allowing her to send them up. Her work in the future, it seemed, would be the preparation of pictures on exactly similar lines which would be rejected in exactly the same way——

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The red-haired girl threshed distressfully across the sheets. 'It's too hot to sleep,' she moaned; and the interruption jarred.

Exactly the same way. Then she would divide her years between the little studio in England and Kami's big studio at Vitry-sur-Marne. No, she would go to another master, who should force her into the success that was her right, if patient toil and desperate endeavour gave one a right to anything. Dick had told her that he had worked ten years to understand his craft. She had worked ten years, and ten years were nothing. Dick had said that ten years were nothing,—but that was in regard to herself only. He had said—this very man who could not find time to write—that he would wait ten years for her, and that she was bound to come back to him sooner or later. He had said this in the absurd letter about sunstroke and diphtheria; and then he had stopped writing. He was wandering up and down moonlit streets, kissing cooks. She would like to lecture him now,—not in her nightgown, of course, but properly dressed, severely and from a height. Yet if he was kissing other girls he certainly would not care whether she lectured him or not. He would laugh at her. Very good. She would go back to her studio and prepare pictures that went, etc. etc. The mill-wheel of thought swung round slowly,

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that no section of it might be slurred over, and the red-haired girl tossed and turned behind her.

Maisie put her chin in her hands and decided that there could be no doubt whatever of the villany of Dick. To justify herself, she began, unwomanly, to weigh the evidence. There was a boy, and he had said he loved her. And he kissed her,—kissed her on the cheek,—by a yellow sea-poppy that nodded its head exactly like the maddening dry rose in the garden. Then there was an interval, and men had told her that they loved her—just when she was busiest with her work. Then the boy came back, and at their very second meeting had told her that he loved her. Then he had—— But there was no end to the things he had done. He had given her his time and his powers. He had spoken to her of Art, housekeeping, technique, teacups, the abuse of pickles as a stimulant,—that was rude,—sable-hair brushes,—he had given her the best in her stock,—she used them daily; he had given her advice that she profited by, and now and again—a look. Such a look! The look of a beaten hound waiting for the word to crawl to his mistress's feet. In return she had given him nothing whatever, except—here she brushed her mouth against the open-work sleeve of her nightgown—the privilege of kissing her once. And on the mouth, too.

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Disgraceful! Was that not enough, and more than enough? and if it was not, had he not cancelled the debt by not writing and—probably kissing other girls?

‘Maisie, you’ll catch a chill. Do go and lie down,’ said the wearied voice of her companion. ‘I can’t sleep a wink with you at the window.’

Maisie shrugged her shoulders and did not answer. She was reflecting on the meannesses of Dick, and on other meannesses with which he had nothing to do. The remorseless moonlight would not let her sleep. It lay on the skylight of the studio across the road in cold silver; she stared at it intently, and her thoughts began to slide one into the other. The shadow of the big bell-handle in the wall grew short, lengthened again, and faded out as the moon went down behind the pasture and a hare came limping home across the road. Then the dawn-wind washed through the upland grasses, and brought coolness with it, and the cattle lowed by the drought-shrunk river. Maisie’s head fell forward on the window-sill, and the tangle of black hair covered her arms.

‘Maisie, wake up. You’ll catch a chill.’

‘Yes, dear; yes, dear.’ She staggered to her bed like a wearied child, and as she buried her face in the pillows she muttered, ‘I think—I think. . . . But he ought to have written.’

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

Day brought the routine of the studio, the smell of paint and turpentine, and the monotonous wisdom of Kami, who was a leaden artist, but a golden teacher if the pupil were only in sympathy with him. Maisie was not in sympathy that day, and she waited impatiently for the end of the work. She knew when it was coming; for Kami would gather his black alpaca coat into a bunch behind him, and, with faded blue eyes that saw neither pupils nor canvas, look back into the past to recall the history of one Binat. 'You have all done not so badly,' he would say. 'But you shall remember that it is not enough to have the method, and the art, and the power, nor even that which is touch, but you shall have also the conviction that nails the work to the wall. Of the so many I have taught,'—here the students would begin to unfix drawing-pins or get their tubes together,—'the very so many that I have taught, the best was Binat. All that comes of the study and the work and the knowledge was to him even when he came. After he left me he should have done all that could be done with the colour, the form, and the knowledge. Only, he had not the conviction. So to-day I hear no more of Binat,—the best of my pupils,—and that is long ago. So to-day, too, you will be glad to hear no more of me. *Continuez, mesdemoiselles*, and, above all, with conviction.'

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

He went into the garden to smoke and mourn over the lost Binat as the pupils dispersed to their several cottages or loitered in the studio to make plans for the cool of the afternoon.

Maisie looked at her very unhappy Melancolia, restrained a desire to grimace before it, and was hurrying across the road to write a letter to Dick, when she was aware of a large man on a white troop-horse. How Torpenhow had managed in the course of twenty hours to find his way to the hearts of the cavalry officers in quarters at Vitry-sur-Marne, to discuss with them the certainty of a glorious revenge for France, to reduce the colonel to tears of pure affability, and to borrow the best horse in the squadron for the journey to Kami's studio, is a mystery that only special correspondents can unravel.

'I beg your pardon,' said he. 'It seems an absurd question to ask, but the fact is that I don't know her by any other name: Is there any young lady here that is called Maisie?'

'I am Maisie,' was the answer from the depths of a great sun-hat.

'I ought to introduce myself,' he said, as the horse capered in the blinding white dust. 'My name is Torpenhow. Dick Helder is my best friend, and—and—the fact is that he has gone blind.'

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

‘Blind!’ said Maisie stupidly. ‘He can’t be blind.’

‘He has been stone-blind for nearly two months.’

Maisie lifted up her face, and it was pearly white. ‘No! No! Not blind! I won’t have him blind!’

‘Would you care to see for yourself?’ said Torpenhow.

‘Now,—at once?’

‘Oh no! The Paris train doesn’t go through this place till eight to-night. There will be ample time.’

‘Did Mr. Helder send you to me?’

‘Certainly not. Dick wouldn’t do that sort of thing. He’s sitting in his studio, turning over some letters that he can’t read because he’s blind.’

There was a sound of choking from the sun-hat. Maisie bowed her head and went into the cottage, where the red-haired girl was on a sofa, complaining of a headache.

‘Dick’s blind!’ said Maisie, taking her breath quickly as she steadied herself against a chair-back.

‘My Dick’s blind!’

‘What?’ The girl was on the sofa no longer.

‘A man has come from England to tell me. He hasn’t written to me for six weeks.’

‘Are you going to him?’

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

‘I must think.’

‘Think! I should go back to London and see him, and I should kiss his eyes, and kiss them and kiss them until they got well again! If you don’t go I shall. Oh, what am I talking about? You wicked little idiot! Go to him at once. Go!’

Torpenhow’s neck was blistering, but he preserved a smile of infinite patience as Maisie appeared bareheaded in the sunshine.

‘I am coming,’ said she, her eyes on the ground.

‘You will be at Vitry Station, then, at seven this evening.’ This was an order delivered by one who was used to being obeyed. Maisie said nothing, but she felt grateful that there was no chance of disputing with this big man who took everything for granted and managed a squealing horse with one hand. She returned to the red-haired girl, who was weeping bitterly, and between tears, kisses,—very few of those,—menthol, packing, and an interview with Kami, the sultry afternoon wore away. Thought might come afterwards. Her present duty was to go to Dick,—Dick who owned the wondrous friend and sat in the dark playing with her unopened letters.

‘But what will you do?’ she said to her companion.



THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

‘I? Oh, I shall stay here and—finish your Melancolia,’ she said, smiling pitifully. ‘Write to me afterwards.’

That night there ran a legend through Vitry-sur-Marne of a mad Englishman, doubtless suffering from sunstroke, who had drunk all the officers of the garrison under the table, had borrowed a horse from the lines, and had then and there eloped, after the English custom, with one of those more than mad English girls who drew pictures down there under the care of that good Monsieur Kami.

‘They are very droll,’ said Suzanne to the conscript in the moonlight by the studio wall. ‘She walked always with those big eyes that saw nothing, and yet she kisses me on both cheeks as though she were my sister, and gives me—see—ten francs!’

The conscript levied a contribution on both gifts; for he prided himself on being a good soldier.

Torpenhow spoke very little to Maisie during the journey to Calais; but he was careful to attend to all her wants, to get her a compartment entirely to herself, and to leave her alone. He was amazed at the ease with which the matter had been accomplished.

‘The safest thing would be to let her think

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

things out. By Dick's showing,—when he was off his head,—she must have ordered him about very thoroughly. Wonder how she likes being under orders.'

Maisie never told. She sat in the empty compartment often with her eyes shut, that she might realise the sensation of blindness. It was an order that she should return to London swiftly, and she found herself at last almost beginning to enjoy the situation. This was better than looking after luggage and a red-haired friend who never took any interest in her surroundings. But there appeared to be a feeling in the air that she, Maisie,—of all people,—was in disgrace. Therefore she justified her conduct to herself with great success, till Torpenhow came up to her on the steamer, and without preface began to tell the story of Dick's blindness, suppressing a few details, but dwelling at length on the miseries of delirium. He stopped before he reached the end, as though he had lost interest in the subject, and went forward to smoke. Maisie was furious with him and with herself.

She was hurried on from Dover to London almost before she could ask for breakfast, and—she was past any feeling of indignation now—was bidden curtly to wait in a hall at the foot of some lead-covered stairs while Torpenhow went up to



THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

make inquiries. Again the knowledge that she was being treated like a naughty little girl made her pale cheeks flame. It was all Dick's fault for being so stupid as to go blind.

Torpenhow led her up to a shut door, which he opened very softly. Dick was sitting by the window, with his chin on his chest. There were three envelopes in his hand, and he turned them over and over. The big man who gave orders was no longer by her side, and the studio door snapped behind her.

Dick thrust the letters into his pocket as he heard the sound. 'Hullo, Torp! Is that you? I've been so lonely.'

His voice had taken the peculiar flatness of the blind. Maisie pressed herself up into a corner of the room. Her heart was beating furiously, and she put one hand on her breast to keep it quiet. Dick was staring directly at her, and she realised for the first time that he was blind. Shutting her eyes in a railway-carriage to open them when she pleased was child's play. This man was blind though his eyes were wide open.

'Torp, is that you? They said you were coming.' Dick looked puzzled and a little irritated at the silence.

'No: it's only me,' was the answer, in a strained little whisper. Maisie could hardly move her lips.

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

‘H’m!’ said Dick composedly, without moving. ‘This is a new phenomenon. Darkness I’m getting used to; but I object to hearing voices.’

Was he mad, then, as well as blind, that he talked to himself? Maisie’s heart beat more wildly, and she breathed in gasps. Dick rose and began to feel his way across the room, touching each table and chair as he passed. Once he caught his foot on a rug, and swore, dropping on his knees to feel what the obstruction might be. Maisie remembered him walking in the Park as though all the earth belonged to him, tramping up and down her studio two months ago, and flying up the gangway of the Channel steamer. The beating of her heart was making her sick, and Dick was coming nearer, guided by the sound of her breathing. She put out a hand mechanically to ward him off or to draw him to herself, she did not know which. It touched his chest, and he stepped back as though he had been shot.

‘It’s Maisie!’ said he, with a dry sob. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came—I came—to see you, please.’

Dick’s lips closed firmly.

‘Won’t you sit down, then? You see, I’ve had some bother with my eyes, and——’

‘I know. I know. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I couldn’t write.’

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

‘You might have told Mr. Torpenhow.’

‘What has he to do with my affairs?’

‘He—he brought me from Vitry-sur-Marne. He thought I ought to see you.’

‘Why, what has happened? Can I do anything for you? No, I can’t. I forgot.’

‘Oh, Dick, I’m so sorry! I’ve come to tell you, and—— Let me take you back to your chair.’

‘Don’t! I’m not a child. You only do that out of pity. I never meant to tell you anything about it. I’m no good now. I’m down and done for. Let me alone!’

He groped back to his chair, his chest labouring as he sat down.

Maisie watched him, and the fear went out of her heart, to be followed by a very bitter shame. He had spoken a truth that had been hidden from the girl through every step of the impetuous flight to London; for he was, indeed, down and done for—masterful no longer, but rather a little abject; neither an artist stronger than she, nor a man to be looked up to—only some blind one that sat in a chair and seemed on the point of crying. She was immensely and unfeignedly sorry for him—more sorry than she had ever been for any one in her life, but not sorry enough to deny his words. So she stood still and felt ashamed and a little

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hurt, because she had honestly intended that her journey should end triumphantly; and now she was only filled with pity most startlingly distinct from love.

‘Well?’ said Dick, his face steadily turned away. ‘I never meant to worry you any more. What’s the matter?’

He was conscious that Maisie was catching her breath, but was as unprepared as herself for the torrent of emotion that followed. People who cannot cry easily weep unrestrainedly when the fountains of the great deep are broken up. She had dropped into a chair and was sobbing with her face hidden in her hands.

‘I can’t—I can’t!’ she cried desperately. ‘Indeed, I can’t. It isn’t my fault. I’m so sorry. Oh, Dickie, I’m so sorry.’

Dick’s shoulders straightened again, for the words lashed like a whip. Still the sobbing continued. It is not good to realise that you have failed in the hour of trial or flinched before the mere possibility of making sacrifices.

‘I do despise myself—indeed I do. But I can’t. Oh, Dickie, you wouldn’t ask me—would you?’ wailed Maisie.

She looked up for a minute, and by chance it happened that Dick’s eyes fell on hers. The unshaven face was very white and set, and the lips

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

were trying to force themselves into a smile. But it was the worn-out eyes that Maisie feared. Her Dick had gone blind and left in his place some one that she could hardly recognise till he spoke.

‘Who is asking you to do anything, Maisie? I told you how it would be. What’s the use of worrying? For pity’s sake don’t cry like that; it isn’t worth it.’

‘You don’t know how I hate myself. Oh, Dick, help me—help me!’ The passion of tears had grown beyond her control and was beginning to alarm the man. He stumbled forward and put his arm round her, and her head fell on his shoulder.

‘Hush, dear, hush! Don’t cry. You’re quite right, and you’ve nothing to reproach yourself with—you never had. You’re only a little upset by the journey, and I don’t suppose you’ve had any breakfast. What a brute Torp was to bring you over.’

‘I wanted to come. I did indeed,’ she protested.

‘Very well. And now you’ve come and seen, and I’m—immensely grateful. When you’re better you shall go away and get something to eat. What sort of a passage did you have coming over?’

Maisie was crying more subduedly, for the first

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time in her life glad that she had something to lean against. Dick patted her on the shoulder tenderly but clumsily, for he was not quite sure where her shoulder might be.

She drew herself out of his arms at last and waited, trembling and most unhappy. He had felt his way to the window to put the width of the room between them, and to quiet a little the tumult in his heart.

‘Are you better now?’ he said.

‘Yes, but—don’t you hate me?’

‘I hate you? My God! I?’

‘Isn’t— isn’t there anything I could do for you, then? I’ll stay here in England to do it, if you like. Perhaps I could come and see you sometimes.’

‘I think not, dear. It would be kindest not to see me any more, please. I don’t want to seem rude, but—don’t you think—perhaps you had almost better go now.’

He was conscious that he could not bear himself as a man if the strain continued much longer.

‘I don’t deserve anything else. I’ll go, Dick. Oh, I’m so miserable.’

‘Nonsense. You’ve nothing to worry about; I’d tell you if you had. Wait a moment, dear. I’ve got something to give you first. I meant it for you ever since this little trouble began. It’s my

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

Melancholia; she was a beauty when I last saw her. You can keep her for me, and if ever you're poor you can sell her. She's worth a few hundreds at any state of the market.' He groped among his canvases. 'She's framed in black. Is this a black frame that I have my hand on? There she is. What do you think of her?'

He turned a scarred, formless muddle of paint towards Maisie, and the eyes strained as though they would catch her wonder and surprise. One thing and one thing only could she do for him.

'Well?'

The voice was fuller and more rounded, because the man knew he was speaking of his best work. Maisie looked at the blur, and a lunatic desire to laugh caught her by the throat. But for Dick's sake—whatever this mad blankness might mean—she must make no sign. Her voice choked with hard-held tears as she answered, still gazing on the wreck—

'Oh, Dick, it is good!'

He heard the little hysterical gulp and took it for tribute. 'Won't you have it, then? I'll send it over to your house if you will.'

'I? Oh yes—thank you. Ha! ha!' If she did not fly at once the laughter that was worse than tears would kill her. She turned and ran, choking and blinded, down the staircases that were empty of life, to take refuge in a cab and go to her

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

house across the Park. There she sat down in the almost dismantled drawing-room and thought of Dick in his blindness, useless till the end of life, and of herself in her own eyes. Behind the sorrow, the shame, and the humiliation, lay fear of the cold wrath of the red-haired girl when Maisie should return. Maisie had never feared her companion before. Not until she found herself saying, 'Well, he never asked me,' did she realise her scorn of herself.

And that is the end of Maisie.

For Dick was reserved more searching torment. He could not realise at first that Maisie, whom he had ordered to go, had left him without a word of farewell. He was savagely angry against Torpenhow, who had brought upon him this humiliation and troubled his miserable peace. Then his dark hour came, and he was alone with himself and his desires to get what help he could from the darkness. The queen could do no wrong, but in following the right, so far as it served her work, she had wounded her one subject more than his own brain would let him know.

'It's all I had and I've lost it,' he said, as soon as the misery permitted clear thinking. 'And Torp will think that he has been so infernally clever that I shan't have the heart to tell him. I must think this out quietly.'

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

‘Hullo!’ said Torpenhow, entering the studio after Dick had enjoyed two hours of thought. ‘I’m back. Are you feeling any better?’

‘Torp, I don’t know what to say. Come here.’ Dick coughed huskily, wondering, indeed, what he should say, and how to say it temperately.

‘What’s the need for saying anything? Get up and tramp.’ Torpenhow was perfectly satisfied.

They walked up and down as of custom, Torpenhow’s hand on Dick’s shoulder, and Dick buried in his own thoughts.

‘How in the world did you find it all out?’ said Dick at last.

‘You shouldn’t go off your head if you want to keep secrets, Dickie. It was absolutely impertinent on my part; but if you’d seen me rocketing about on a half-trained French troop-horse under a blazing sun you’d have laughed. There will be a charivari in my rooms to-night. Seven other devils——’

‘I know—the row in the Southern Soudan. I surprised their councils the other day, and it made me unhappy. Have you fixed your flint to go? Who d’you work for?’

‘Haven’t signed any contracts yet. I wanted to see how your business would turn out.’

‘Would you have stayed with me, then, if—things had gone wrong?’ He put his question cautiously.

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

‘Don’t ask me too much. I’m only a man.’

‘You’ve tried to be an angel very successfully.’

‘Oh ye—es! . . . Well, do you attend the function to-night? We shall be half screwed before the morning. All the men believe the war’s a certainty.’

‘I don’t think I will, old man, if it’s all the same to you. I’ll stay quiet here.’

‘And meditate? I don’t blame you. You deserve a good time if ever a man did.’

That night there was tumult on the stairs. The correspondents poured in from theatre, dinner, and music-hall to Torpenhow’s room that they might discuss their plan of campaign in the event of military operations being a certainty. Torpenhow, the Keneu, and the Nilghai had bidden all the men they had worked with to the orgy; and Mr. Beeton, the housekeeper, declared that never before in his checkered experience had he seen quite such a fancy lot of gentlemen. They waked the chambers with shoutings and song; and the elder men were quite as bad as the younger. For the chances of war were in front of them, and all knew what those meant.

Sitting in his own room a little perplexed by the noise across the landing, Dick suddenly began to laugh to himself.

‘When one comes to think of it the situation is

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

intensely comic. Maisie's quite right—poor little thing. I didn't know she could cry like that before; but now I know what Torp thinks, I'm sure he'd be quite fool enough to stay at home and try to console me—if he knew. Besides, it isn't nice to own that you've been thrown over like a broken chair. I must carry this business through alone—as usual. If there isn't a war, and Torp finds out, I shall look foolish, that's all. If there is a war I mustn't interfere with another man's chances. Business is business, and I want to be alone—I want to be alone. What a row they're making!

Somebody hammered at the studio door.

'Come out and frolic, Dickie,' said the Nilghai.

'I should like to, but I can't. I'm not feeling frolicsome.'

'Then I'll tell the boys and they'll draw you like a badger.'

'Please not, old man. On my word, I'd sooner be left alone just now.'

'Very good. Can we send anything in to you? Fizz, for instance. Cassavetti is beginning to sing songs of the Sunny South already.'

For one minute Dick considered the proposition seriously.

'No, thanks. I've a headache already.'

'Virtuous child. That's the effect of emotion

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

on the young. All my congratulations, Dick. I also was concerned in the conspiracy for your welfare.'

'Go to the devil and—oh, send Binkie in here.'

The little dog entered on elastic feet, riotous from having been made much of all the evening. He had helped to sing the choruses; but scarcely inside the studio he realised that this was no place for tail-wagging, and settled himself on Dick's lap till it was bedtime. Then he went to bed with Dick, who counted every hour as it struck, and rose in the morning with a painfully clear head to receive Torpenhow's more formal congratulations and a particular account of the last night's revels.

'You aren't looking very happy for a newly-accepted man,' said Torpenhow.

'Never mind that—it's my own affair, and I'm all right. Do you really go?'

'Yes. With the old Central Southern as usual. They wired and I accepted on better terms than before.'

'When do you start?'

'The day after to-morrow—for Brindisi.

'Thank God.' Dick spoke from the bottom of his heart.

'Well, that's not a pretty way of saying you're glad to get rid of me. But men in your condition are allowed to be selfish.'

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

'I didn't mean that. Will you get a hundred pounds cashed for me before you leave?'

'That's a slender amount for housekeeping, isn't it?'

'Oh, it's only for—marriage expenses.'

Torpenhow brought him the money, counted it out in fives and tens, and carefully put it away in the writing-table.

'Now I suppose I shall have to listen to his ravings about his girl until I go. Heaven send us patience with a man in love!' said he to himself.

But never a word did Dick say of Maisie or marriage. He hung in the doorway of Torpenhow's room when the latter was packing, and asked innumerable questions about the coming campaign, till Torpenhow began to feel annoyed.

'You're a secretive animal, Dickie, and you consume your own smoke, don't you?' he said on the last evening.

'I—I suppose so. By the way, how long do you think this war will last?'

'Days, weeks, or months. One can never tell. It may go on for years.'

'I wish I were going.'

'Good heavens! You're the most unaccountable creature! Hasn't it occurred to you that you're going to be married—thanks to me?'

'Of course, yes. I'm going to be married—so

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

I am. Going to be married. I'm awfully grateful to you. Haven't I told you that?'

'You might be going to be hanged by the look of you,' said Torpenhow.

And the next day Torpenhow bade him good-bye and left him to the loneliness he had so much desired.

CHAPTER XIV

Yet at the last, ere our spearmen had found him,
Yet at the last, ere a sword-thrust could save,
Yet at the last, with his masters around him,
He of the Faith spoke as master to slave ;
Yet at the last, tho' the Kafirs had maimed him,
Broken by bondage and wrecked by the reiver,—
Yet at the last, tho' the darkness had claimed him,
He called upon Allah and died a believer.

Kizilbashi.

‘**B**EG your pardon, Mr. Heldar, but—but isn’t nothin’ going to happen?’ said Mr. Beeton. ‘No!’ Dick had just waked to another morning of blank despair and his temper was of the shortest.

‘Taint my regular business o’ course, sir ; and what I say is, “Mind your own business and let other people mind theirs” ; but just before Mr. Torpenhow went away he give me to understand, like, that you might be moving into a house of your own, so to speak—a sort of house with rooms upstairs and downstairs where you’d be better

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

attended to, though I try to act just by all our tenants. Don't I?'

'Ah! That must have been a mad-house. I shan't trouble you to take me there yet. Get me my breakfast, please, and leave me alone.'

'I hope I haven't done anything wrong, sir, but you know, I hope, that as far as a man can I tries to do the proper thing by all the gentlemen in chambers—and more particular those whose lot is hard—such as you, for instance, Mr. Helder. You likes soft-roë bloater, don't you? Soft-roë bloaters is scarcer than hard-roë, but what I says is, "Never mind a little extra trouble so long as you gives satisfaction to the tenants."'

Mr. Beeton withdrew and left Dick to himself. Torpenhow had been long away; there was no more rioting in the chambers, and Dick had settled down to his new life, which he was weak enough to consider nothing better than death.

It is hard to live alone in the dark, confusing the day and night; dropping to sleep through sheer weariness at mid-day, and rising restless in the chill of the dawn. At first Dick, on his awakenings, would grope along the corridors of the chambers till he heard some one snore. Then he would know that the day had not yet come, and return wearily to his bedroom. Later he learned not to stir till there was a noise and move-

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

ment in the house and Mr. Beeton advised him to get up. Once dressed—and dressing, now that Torpenhow was away, was a lengthy business, because collars, ties, and the like, hid themselves in far corners of the room, and search meant head-beating against chairs and trunks—once dressed, there was nothing whatever to do except to sit still and brood till the three daily meals came. Centuries separated breakfast from lunch, and lunch from dinner, and though a man prayed for hundreds of years that his mind might be taken from him, God would never hear. Rather the mind was quickened and the revolving thoughts ground against each other as millstones grind when there is no corn between; and yet the brain would not wear out and give him rest. It continued to think, at length, with imagery and all manner of reminiscences. It recalled Maisie and past success, reckless travels by land and sea, the glory of doing work and feeling that it was good, and suggested all that might have happened had the eyes only been faithful to their duty. When thinking ceased through sheer weariness, there poured into Dick's soul tide on tide of overwhelming, purposeless fear—dread of starvation always, terror lest the unseen ceiling should crush down upon him, fear of fire in the chambers and a louse's death in red flame, and agonies of fiercer horror that had nothing to do

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

with any fear of death. Then Dick bowed his head, and clutching the arms of his chair fought with his sweating self till the tinkle of plates told him that something to eat was being set before him.

Mr. Beeton would bring the meal when he had time to spare, and Dick learned to hang upon his speech which dealt with badly-fitted gas-plugs, waste-pipes out of repair, little tricks for driving picture-nails into walls, and the sins of the char-woman or the housemaids. In the lack of better things the small gossip of a servant's hall becomes immensely interesting, and the screwing of a washer on a tap an event to be talked over for days.

Once or twice a week, too, Mr. Beeton would take Dick out with him when he went marketing in the morning to haggle with tradesmen over fish, lamp-wicks, mustard, tapioca, and so forth, while Dick rested his weight first on one foot and then on the other, and played aimlessly with the tins and string-ball on the counter. Then they would, perhaps, meet one of Mr. Beeton's friends, and Dick, standing aside a little, would hold his peace till Mr. Beeton was willing to go on again.

The life did not increase his self-respect. He abandoned shaving as a dangerous exercise, and being shaved in a barber's shop meant exposure of his infirmity. He could not see that his clothes were properly brushed, and since he had never

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

taken any care of his personal appearance he became every known variety of sloven. A blind man cannot eat with cleanliness till he has been some months used to the darkness. If he demand attendance and grow angry at the want of it, he must assert himself and stand upright. Then the meanest menial can see that he is blind and, therefore, of no consequence. A wise man will keep his eyes on the floor and sit still. For amusement he may pick coal lump by lump out of the scuttle with the tongs, and pile it in a little heap in the fender, keeping count of the lumps, which must all be put back again, one by one and very carefully. He may set himself sums if he cares to work them out ; he may talk to himself or to the cat if she chooses to visit him ; and if his trade has been that of an artist, he may sketch in the air with his forefinger ; but that is too much like drawing a pig with the eyes shut. He may go to his bookshelves and count his books, ranging them in order of their size ; or to his wardrobe and count his shirts, laying them in piles of two or three on the bed, as they suffer from frayed cuffs or lost buttons. Even this entertainment wearies after a time ; and all the times are very, very long.

Dick was allowed to sort a tool-chest where Mr. Beeton kept hammers, taps and nuts, lengths of gas-pipes, oil-bottles and string.

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

'If I don't have everything just where I know where to look for it, why, then, I can't find anything when I do want it. You've no idea, sir, the amount of little things that these chambers uses up,' said Mr. Beeton. Fumbling at the handle of the door as he went out: 'It's hard on you, sir, I *do* think it's hard on you. Ain't you going to do anything, sir?'

'I'll pay my rent and messing. Isn't that enough?'

'I wasn't doubting for a moment that you couldn't pay your way, sir; but I've often said to my wife, "It's 'ard on 'im because it isn't as if he was an old man, nor yet a middle-aged one, but quite a young gentleman. *That's* where it comes so 'ard.'"'

'I suppose so,' said Dick absently. This particular nerve through long battering had ceased to feel—much.

'I was thinking,' continued Mr. Beeton, still making as if to go, 'that you might like to hear my boy Alf read you the papers sometimes of an evening. He do read beautiful, seeing he's only nine.'

'I should be very grateful,' said Dick. 'Only let me make it worth his while.'

'We wasn't thinking of *that*, sir, but of course it's in your own 'ands; but only to 'ear Alf sing "A Boy's best Friend is 'is Mother!" Ah!'

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

'I'll hear him sing that too. Let him come in this evening with the newspapers.'

Alf was not a nice child, being puffed up with many school-board certificates for good conduct, and inordinately proud of his singing. Mr. Beeton remained, beaming, while the child wailed his way through a song of some eight eight-line verses in the usual whine of the young Cockney, and, after compliments, left him to read Dick the foreign telegrams. Ten minutes later Alf returned to his parents rather pale and scared.

'E said 'e couldn't stand it no more,' he explained.

'He never said you read badly, Alf?' Mrs. Beeton spoke.

'No. 'E said I read beautiful. Said 'e never 'eard any one read like that, but 'e said 'e couldn't abide the stuff in the papers.'

'P'raps he's lost some money in the Stocks. Were you readin' him about Stocks, Alf?'

'No; it was all about fightin' out there where the soldiers is gone—a great long piece with all the lines close together and very hard words in it. 'E give me 'arf a crown because I read so well. And 'e says the next time there's anything 'e wants read 'e'll send for me.'

'That's good hearing, but I do think for all the half-crown—put it into the kicking-donkey money-

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box, Alf, and let me see you do it—he might have kept you longer. Why, he couldn't have begun to understand how beautiful you read.'

'He's best left to himself—gentlemen always are when they're downhearted,' said Mr. Beeton.

Alf's rigorously limited powers of comprehending Torpenhow's special correspondence had waked the devil of unrest in Dick. He could hear, through the boy's nasal chant, the camels grunting in the squares behind the soldiers outside Suakin; could hear the men swearing and chaffing across the cooking pots, and could smell the acrid wood-smoke as it drifted over the camp before the wind of the desert.

That night he prayed to God that his mind might be taken from him, offering for proof that he was worthy of this favour the fact that he had not shot himself long ago. That prayer was not answered, and indeed Dick knew in his heart of hearts that only a lingering sense of humour and no special virtue had kept him alive. Suicide, he had persuaded himself, would be a ludicrous insult to the gravity of the situation as well as a weak-kneed confession of fear.

'Just for the fun of the thing,' he said to the cat, who had taken Binkie's place in his establishment, 'I should like to know how long this is going to last. I can live for a year on the hundred



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pounds Torp cashed for me. I must have two or three thousand at least at the Bank—twenty or thirty years more provided for, that is to say. Then I fall back on my hundred and twenty a year which will be more by that time. Let's consider. Twenty-five—thirty-five—a man's in his prime then, they say—forty-five—a middle-aged man just entering politics—fifty-five—"died at the comparatively early age of fifty-five," according to the newspapers. Bah! How these Christians funk death! Sixty-five—we're only getting on in years. Seventy-five is just possible though. Great Hell, cat O! fifty years more of solitary confinement in the dark! You'll die, and Beeton will die, and Torp will die, and Mai—everybody else will die, but I shall be alive and kicking with nothing to do. I'm very sorry for myself. I should like some one else to be sorry for me. Evidently I'm not going mad before I die, but the pain's just as bad as ever. Some day when you're vivisected, cat O! they'll tie you down on a little table and cut you open—but don't be afraid; they'll take precious good care that you don't die. You'll live, and you'll be very sorry then that you weren't sorry for me. Perhaps Torp will come back or . . . I wish I could go to Torp and the Nilghai, even though I were in their way.'

Pussy left the room before the speech was

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ended, and Alf, as he entered, found Dick addressing the empty hearth-rug.

‘There’s a letter for you, sir,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you’d like me to read it.’

‘Lend it to me for a minute and I’ll tell you.’

The outstretched hand shook just a little and the voice was not over-steady. It was within the limits of human possibility that—that was no letter from Maisie. He knew the heft of three closed envelopes only too well. It was a foolish hope that the girl should write to him, for he did not realise that there is a wrong which admits of no reparation though the evildoer may with tears and the heart’s best love strive to mend all. It is best to forget that wrong whether it be caused or endured, since it is as remediless as bad work once put forward.

‘Read it, then,’ said Dick, and Alf began intoning according to the rules of the Board School—

“I could have given you love, I could have given you loyalty, such as you never dreamed of. Do you suppose I cared what you were? But you chose to whistle everything down the wind for nothing. My only excuse for you is that you are so young.”

‘That’s all,’ he said, returning the paper to be dropped into the fire.

‘What was in the letter?’ asked Mrs. Beeton when Alf returned.

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'I don't know. I think it was a circular or a tract about not whistlin' at everything when you're young.'

'I must have stepped on something when I was alive and walking about, and it has bounced up and hit me. God help it, whatever it is—unless it was all a joke. But I don't know any one who'd take the trouble to play a joke on me. . . . Love and loyalty for nothing. It sounds tempting enough. I wonder whether I have lost anything really?'

Dick considered for a long time, but could not remember when or how he had put himself in the way of winning these trifles at a woman's hands.

Still, the letter as touching on matters that he preferred not to think about stung him into a fit of frenzy that lasted for a day and night. When his heart was so full of despair that it would hold no more, body and soul together seemed to be dropping without check through the darkness. Then came fear of darkness and desperate attempts to reach the light again. But there was no light to be reached. When that agony had left him sweating and breathless, the downward flight would recommence till the gathering torture of it spurred him into another fight as hopeless as the first. Followed some few minutes of sleep in which he dreamed that he saw. Then the procession of events would

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repeat itself till he was utterly worn out, and the brain took up its everlasting consideration of Maisie and might-have-beens.

At the end of everything Mr. Beeton came to his room and volunteered to take him out. 'Not marketing this time, but we'll go into the Parks if you like.'

'Be damned if I do,' quoth Dick. 'Keep to the streets and walk up and down. I like to hear the people round me.'

This was not altogether true. The blind in the first stages of their infirmity dislike those who can move with a free stride and unlifted arms—but Dick had no earthly desire to go to the Parks. Once and only once since Maisie had shut the door he had gone there under Alf's charge. Alf forgot him and fished for minnows in the Serpentine with some companions. After half an hour's waiting Dick, almost weeping with rage and wrath, caught a passer-by who introduced him to a friendly policeman, who led him to a four-wheeler opposite the Albert Hall. He never told Mr. Beeton of Alf's forgetfulness, but . . . this was not the manner in which he was used to walk the Parks aforetime.

'What streets would you like to walk down, then?' said Mr. Beeton sympathetically. His own ideas of a riotous holiday meant picnicking on the

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grass of the Green Park with his family, and half a dozen paper bags full of food.

‘Keep to the river,’ said Dick, and they kept to the river, and the rush of it was in his ears till they came to Blackfriars Bridge and struck thence on to the Waterloo Road, Mr. Beeton explaining the beauties of the scenery as he went on.

‘And walking on the other side of the pavement,’ said he, ‘unless I’m much mistaken, is the young woman that used to come to your rooms to be drawn. I never forgets a face and I never remembers a name, except paying tenants, o’ course!’

‘Stop her,’ said Dick. ‘It’s Bessie Broke. Tell her I’d like to speak to her again. Quick, man!’

Mr. Beeton crossed the road under the noses of the omnibuses and arrested Bessie then on her way northward. She recognised him as the man in authority who used to glare at her when she passed up Dick’s staircase, and her first impulse was to run.

‘Wasn’t you Mr. Helder’s model?’ said Mr. Beeton, planting himself in front of her. ‘You was. He’s on the other side of the road and he’d like to see you.’

‘Why?’ said Bessie faintly. She remembered—indeed had never for long forgotten—an affair connected with a newly-finished picture.

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‘Because he has asked me to do so, and because he’s most particular blind.’

‘Drunk?’

‘No. ’Orspital blind. He can’t see. That’s him over there.’

Dick was leaning against the parapet of the bridge as Mr. Beeton pointed him out—a stubbearded, bowed creature wearing a dirty magenta coloured neckcloth outside an unbrushed coat. There was nothing to fear from such an one. Even if he chased her, Bessie thought, he could not follow far. She crossed over and Dick’s face lighted up. It was long since a woman of any kind had taken the trouble to speak to him.

‘I hope you’re well, Mr. Helder?’ said Bessie, a little puzzled. Mr. Beeton stood by with the air of an ambassador and breathed responsibly.

‘I’m very well indeed, and, by Jove! I’m glad to see—hear you, I mean, Bess. You never thought it worth while to turn up and see us again after you got your money. I don’t know why you should. Are you going anywhere in particular just now?’

‘I was going for a walk,’ said Bessie.

‘Not the old business?’ Dick spoke under his breath.

‘Lor, no! I paid my premium’—Bessie was very proud of that word—‘for a barmaid, sleeping

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in, and I'm at the bar now quite respectable. Indeed I am.'

Mr. Beeton had no special reason to believe in the loftiness of human nature. Therefore he dissolved himself like a mist and returned to his gas-plugs without a word of apology. Bessie watched the flight with a certain uneasiness; but so long as Dick appeared to be ignorant of the harm that had been done to him. . . .

'It's hard work pulling the beer-handles,' she went on, 'and they've got one of them penny-in-the-slot cash-machines, so if you get wrong by a penny at the end of the day—but then I don't believe the machinery is right. Do you?'

'I've only seen it work. Mr. Beeton.'

'He's gone.'

'I'm afraid I must ask you to help me home, then. I'll make it worth your while. You see.' The sightless eyes turned towards her and Bessie saw.

'It isn't taking you out of your way?' he said hesitatingly. 'I can ask a policeman if it is.'

'Not at all. I come on at seven and I'm off at four. That's easy hours.'

'Good God!—but I'm on all the time. I wish I had some work to do too. Let's go home, Bess.'

He turned and cannoned into a man on the sidewalk, recoiling with an oath. Bessie took his

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arm and said nothing—as she had said nothing when he had ordered her to turn her face a little more to the light. They walked for some time in silence, the girl steering him deftly through the crowd.

‘And where’s—where’s Mr. Torpenhow?’ she inquired at last.

‘He has gone away to the desert.’

‘Where’s that?’

Dick pointed to the right. ‘East—out of the mouth of the river,’ said he. ‘Then west, then south, and then east again, all along the under-side of Europe. Then south again, God knows how far.’ The explanation did not enlighten Bessie in the least, but she held her tongue and looked to Dick’s path till they came to the chambers.

‘We’ll have tea and muffins,’ he said joyously. ‘I can’t tell you, Bessie, how glad I am to find you again. What made you go away so suddenly?’

‘I didn’t think you’d want me any more,’ she said, emboldened by his ignorance.

‘I didn’t as a matter of fact—but afterwards—At any rate I’m glad you’ve come. You know the stairs.’

So Bessie led him home to his own place—there was no one to hinder—and shut the door of the studio.

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‘What a mess!’ was her first word. ‘All these things haven’t been looked after for months and months.’

‘No, only weeks, Bess. You can’t expect them to care.’

‘I don’t know what you expect them to do. They ought to know what you’ve paid them for. The dust’s just awful. It’s all over the easel.’

‘I don’t use it much now.’

‘All over the pictures and the floor, and all over your coat. I’d like to speak to them housemaids.’

‘Ring for tea, then.’ Dick felt his way to the one chair he used by custom.

Bessie saw the action and, as far as in her lay, was touched. But there remained always a keen sense of new-found superiority, and it was in her voice when she spoke.

‘How long have you been like this?’ she said wrathfully, as though the blindness were some fault of the housemaids.

‘How?’

‘As you are.’

‘The day after you went away with the check, almost as soon as my picture was finished; I hardly saw her alive.’

‘Then they’ve been cheating you ever since, that’s all. I know their nice little ways.’

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A woman may love one man and despise another, but on general feminine principles she will do her best to save the man she despises from being defrauded. Her loved one can look to himself, but the other man, being obviously an idiot, needs protection.

'I don't think Mr. Beeton cheats much,' said Dick. Bessie was flouncing up and down the room, and he was conscious of a keen sense of enjoyment as he heard the swish of her skirts and the light step between.

'Tea *and* muffins,' she said shortly, when the ring at the bell was answered; 'two teaspoonfuls and one over for the pot. I don't want the old teapot that was here when I used to come. It don't draw. Get another.'

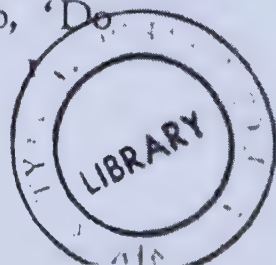
The housemaid went away scandalised, and Dick chuckled. Then he began to cough as Bessie banged up and down the studio disturbing the dust.

'What are you trying to do?'

'Put things straight. This is like unfurnished lodgings. How could you let it go so?'

'How could I help it? Dust away.'

She dusted furiously, and in the midst of all the pother entered Mrs. Beeton. Her husband on his return had explained the situation, winding up with the peculiarly felicitous proverb, 'Do



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unto others as you would be done by.' She had descended to put into her place the person who demanded muffins and an uncracked teapot as though she had a right to both.

'Muffins ready yet?' said Bess, still dusting. She was no longer a drab of the streets, but a young lady who, thanks to Dick's check, had paid her premium and was entitled to pull beer-handles with the best. Being neatly dressed in black she did not hesitate to face Mrs. Beeton, and there passed between the two women certain regards that Dick would have appreciated. The situation adjusted itself by eye. Bessie had won, and Mrs. Beeton returned to cook muffins and make scathing remarks about models, hussies, trollops, and the like, to her husband.

'There's nothing to be got of interfering with him, Liza,' he said. 'Alf, you go along into the street to play. When he isn't crossed he's as kindly as kind, but when he's crossed he's the devil and all. We took too many little things out of his rooms since he was blind to be that particular about what he does. They ain't no objects to a blind man, of course, but if it was to come into court we'd get the sack. Yes, I did introduce him to that girl because I'm a feelin' man myself.'

'Much too feelin'!' Mrs. Beeton slapped the

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muffins into the dish, and thought of comely housemaids long since dismissed on suspicion.

‘I ain’t ashamed of it, and it isn’t for us to judge him hard so long as he pays quiet and regular as he do. I know how to manage young gentlemen, you know how to cook for them, and what I says is, let each stick to his own business and then there won’t be any trouble. Take them muffins down, Liza, and be sure you have no words with that young woman. His lot is cruel hard, and if he’s crossed he do swear worse than any one I’ve ever served.’

‘That’s a little better,’ said Bessie, sitting down to the tea. ‘You needn’t wait, thank you, Mrs. Beeton.’

‘I had no intention of doing such, I do assure you.’

Bessie made no answer whatever. This, she knew, was the way in which real ladies routed their foes, and when one is a barmaid at a first-class public-house one may become a real lady at ten minutes’ notice.

Her eyes fell on Dick opposite her and she was both shocked and displeased. There were droppings of food all down the front of his coat; the mouth, under the ragged ill-grown beard, drooped sullenly; the forehead was lined and contracted; and on the lean temples the hair was

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a dusty, indeterminate colour that might or might not have been called gray. The utter misery and self-abandonment of the man appealed to her, and at the bottom of her heart lay the wicked feeling that he was humbled and brought low who had once humbled her.

‘Oh! it is good to hear you moving about,’ said Dick, rubbing his hands. ‘Tell us all about your bar successes, Bessie, and the way you live now.’

‘Never mind that. I’m quite respectable, as you’d see by looking at me. *You* don’t seem to live too well. What made you go blind that sudden? Why isn’t there any one to look after you?’

Dick was too thankful for the sound of her voice to resent the tone of it.

‘I was cut across the head a long time ago, and that ruined my eyes. I don’t suppose anybody thinks it worth while to look after me any more. Why should they?—and Mr. Beeton really does everything I want.’

‘Don’t you know any gentlemen and ladies, then, while you was—well?’

‘A few, but I don’t care to have them looking at me.’

‘I suppose that’s why you’ve growed a beard. Take it off, it don’t become you.’

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‘Good gracious, child, do you imagine that I think of what becomes me these days?’

‘You ought. Get that taken off before I come here again. I suppose I can come, can’t I?’

‘I’d be only too grateful if you did. I don’t think I treated you very well in the old days. I used to make you angry.’

‘Very angry, you did.’

‘I’m sorry for it, then. Come and see me when you can and as often as you can. God knows, there isn’t a soul in the world to take that trouble except you and Mr. Beeton.’

‘A lot of trouble *he’s* taking and *she* too.’ This with a toss of the head. ‘They’ve let you do anyhow, and they haven’t done anything for you. I’ve only to look to see that much. I’ll come, and I’ll be glad to come, but you must go and be shaved, and you must get some other clothes—those ones aren’t fit to be seen.’

‘I have heaps somewhere,’ he said helplessly.

‘I know you have. Tell Mr. Beeton to give you a new suit and I’ll brush it and keep it clean. You may be as blind as a barn-door, Mr. Helder, but it doesn’t excuse you looking like a sweep.’

‘Do I look like a sweep then?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry for you. I’m that sorry for you!’ she cried impulsively, and took Dick’s

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hands. Mechanically, he lowered his head as if to kiss—she was the only woman who had taken pity on him, and he was not too proud for a little pity now. She stood up to go.

‘Nothing o’ that kind till you look more like a gentleman. It’s quite easy when you get shaved, and some clothes.’

He could hear her drawing on her gloves and rose to say good-bye. She passed behind him, kissed him audaciously on the back of the neck, and ran away as swiftly as on the day when she had destroyed the Melancolia.

‘To think of me kissing Mr. Heldar,’ she said to herself, ‘after all he’s done to me and all! Well, I’m sorry for him, and if he was shaved he wouldn’t be so bad to look at, but . . . Oh them Beetons, how shameful they’ve treated him! I know Beeton’s wearing his shirts on his back to-day just as well as if I’d aired it. To-morrow, I’ll see . . . I wonder if he has much of his own. It might be worth more than the bar—I wouldn’t have to do any work—and just as respectable if no one knew.’

Dick was not grateful to Bessie for her parting gift. He was acutely conscious of it in the nape of his neck throughout the night, but it seemed, among very many other things, to enforce the wisdom of getting shaved. He was shaved

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accordingly in the morning, and felt the better for it. A fresh suit of clothes, white linen, and the knowledge that some one in the world said that she took an interest in his personal appearance, made him carry himself almost upright; for the brain was relieved for a while from thinking of Maisie, who, under other circumstances, might have given that kiss and a million others.

‘Let us consider,’ said he after lunch. ‘The girl can’t care, and it’s a toss-up whether she comes again or not, but if money can buy her to look after me she shall be bought. Nobody else in the world would take the trouble, and I can make it worth her while. She’s a child of the gutter holding brevet rank as a barmaid; so she shall have everything she wants if she’ll only come and talk and look after me.’ He rubbed his newly-shorn chin and began to perplex himself with the thought of her not coming. ‘I suppose I did look rather a sweep,’ he went on. ‘I had no reason to look otherwise. I knew things dropped on my clothes, but it didn’t matter. It would be cruel if she didn’t come. She must. Maisie came once, and that was enough for her. She was quite right. She had something to work for. This creature has only beer-handles to pull, unless she has deluded some young man into keeping company with her. Fancy being cheated for

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the sake of a counter-jumper! We're falling pretty low.'

Something cried aloud within him:—This will hurt more than anything that has gone before. It will recall and remind and suggest and tantalise, and in the end drive you mad.

'I know it, I know it!' Dick cried, clenching his hands despairingly; 'but, good heavens! is a poor blind beggar never to get anything out of his life except three meals a day and a greasy waistcoat? I wish she'd come.'

Early in the afternoon time she came, because there was no young man in her life just then, and she thought of material advantages which would allow her to be idle for the rest of her days.

'I shouldn't have known you,' she said approvingly. 'You look as you used to look—a gentleman that was proud of himself.'

'Don't you think I deserve another kiss then?' said Dick, flushing a little.

'Maybe—but you won't get it yet. Sit down and let's see what I can do for you. I'm certain sure Mr. Beeton cheats you, now that you can't go through the housekeeping books every month. Isn't that true?'

'You'd better come and housekeep for me then, Bessie.'

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‘‘Couldn’t do it in these chambers—you know that as well as I do.’

‘I know, but we might go somewhere else, if you thought it worth your while.’

‘I’d try to look after you, anyhow; but I shouldn’t care to have to work for both of us.’ This was tentative.

Dick laughed.

‘Do you remember where I used to keep my bank-book?’ said he. ‘Torp took it to be balanced just before he went away. Look and see.’

‘It was generally under the tobacco-jar. Ah!’

‘Well?’

‘Oh! Four thousand two hundred and ten pounds nine shillings and a penny! Oh my!’

‘You can have the penny. That’s not bad for one year’s work. Is that and a hundred and twenty pounds a year good enough?’

The idleness and the pretty clothes were almost within her reach now, but she must, by being housewifely, show that she deserved them.

‘Yes; but you’d have to move, and if we took an inventory, I think we’d find that Mr. Beeton has been priggling little things out of the rooms here and there. They don’t look as full as they used.’

‘Never mind, we’ll let him have them. The

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only thing I'm particularly anxious to take away is that picture I used you for—when you used to swear at me. We'll pull out of this place, Bess, and get away as far as ever we can.'

'Oh yes,' she said uneasily.

'I don't know where I can go to get away from myself, but I'll try, and you shall have all the pretty frocks that you care for. You'll like that. Give me that kiss now, Bess. Ye gods! it's good to put one's arm round a woman's waist again.'

Then came the fulfilment of the prophecy within the brain. If his arm were thus round Maisie's waist and a kiss had just been given and taken between them,—why then. . . . He pressed the girl more closely to himself because the pain whipped him. She was wondering how to explain a little accident to the Melancholia. At any rate, if this man really desired the solace of her company—and certainly he would relapse into his original slough if she withdrew it—he would not be more than just a little vexed. It would be delightful at least to see what would happen, and by her teachings it was good for a man to stand in certain awe of his companion.

She laughed nervously, and slipped out of his reach.

'I shouldn't worrit about that picture if I was

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you,' she began, in the hope of turning his attention.

'It's at the back of all my canvases somewhere. Find it, Bess; you know it as well as I do.'

'I know—but——'

'But what? You've wit enough to manage the sale of it to a dealer. Women haggle much better than men. It might be a matter of eight or nine hundred pounds to—to us. I simply didn't like to think about it for a long time. It was mixed up with my life so.—But we'll cover up our tracks and get rid of everything, eh? Make a fresh start from the beginning, Bess.'

Then she began to repent very much indeed, because she knew the value of money. Still, it was probable that the blind man was overestimating the value of his work. Gentlemen, she knew, were absurdly particular about their things. She giggled as a nervous housemaid giggles when she tries to explain the breakage of a pipe.

'I'm very sorry, but you remember I was—I was angry with you before Mr. Torpenhow went away?'

'You were very angry, child; and on my word I think you had some right to be.'

'Then I—but aren't you sure Mr. Torpenhow didn't tell you?'

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‘Tell me what? Good gracious, what are you making such a fuss about when you might just as well be giving me another kiss.’

He was beginning to learn, not for the first time in his experience, that kissing is a cumulative poison. The more you get of it, the more you want. Bessie gave the kiss promptly, whispering, as she did so, ‘I was so angry I rubbed out that picture with the turpentine. You aren’t angry, are you?’

‘What? Say that again.’ The man’s hand had closed on her wrist.

‘I rubbed it out with turps and the knife,’ faltered Bessie. ‘I thought you’d only have to do it over again. You did do it over again, didn’t you? Oh, let go of my wrist; you’re hurting me.’

‘Isn’t there anything left of the thing?’

‘N’nothing that looks like anything. I’m sorry—I didn’t know you’d take on about it; I only meant to do it in fun. You aren’t going to hit me?’

‘Hit you! No! Let’s think.’

He did not relax his hold upon her wrist but stood staring at the carpet. Then he shook his head as a young steer shakes it when the lash of the stock-whip across his nose warns him back to the path to the shambles that he would escape. For weeks he had forced himself not to think of the Melancolia, because she was a part of his dead life.

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With Bessie's return and certain new prospects that had developed themselves the Melancolia—lovelier in his imagination than she had ever been on canvas—reappeared. By her aid he might have procured more money wherewith to amuse Bess and to forget Maisie, as well as another taste of an almost forgotten success. Now, thanks to a vicious little housemaid's folly, there was nothing to look for—not even the hope that he might some day take an abiding interest in the housemaid. Worst of all, he had been made to appear ridiculous in Maisie's eyes. A woman will forgive the man who has ruined her life's work so long as he gives her love: a man may forgive those who ruin the love of his life, but he will never forgive the destruction of his work.

'Tck—tck—tck,' said Dick between his teeth, and then laughed softly. 'It's an omen, Bessie, and—a good many things considered, it serves me right for doing what I have done. By Jove! that accounts for Maisie's running away. She must have thought me perfectly mad—small blame to her! The whole picture ruined, isn't it so? What made you do it?'

'Because I was that angry. I'm not angry now—I'm awful sorry.'

'I wonder.—It doesn't matter, anyhow. I'm to blame for making the mistake.'

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‘What mistake?’

‘Something you wouldn’t understand, dear. Great heavens! to think that a little piece of dirt like you could throw me out of my stride!’ Dick was talking to himself as Bessie tried to shake off his grip on her wrist.

‘I ain’t a piece of dirt, and you shouldn’t call me so! I did it ’cause I hated you, and I’m only sorry now ’cause you’re—’cause you’re——’

‘Exactly—because I’m blind. There’s nothing like tact in little things.’

Bessie began to sob. She did not like being shackled against her will; she was afraid of the blind face and the look upon it, and was sorry too that her great revenge had only made Dick laugh.

‘Don’t cry,’ he said, and took her into his arms. ‘You only did what you thought right.’

‘I—I ain’t a little piece of dirt, and if you say that I’ll never come to you again.’

‘You don’t know what you’ve done to me. I’m not angry—indeed, I’m not. Be quiet for a minute.’

Bessie remained in his arms shrinking. Dick’s first thought was connected with Maisie, and it hurt him as white-hot iron hurts an open sore.

Not for nothing is a man permitted to ally himself to the wrong woman. The first pang—the first sense of things lost is but the prelude to

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the play, for the very just Providence who delights in causing pain has decreed that the agony shall return, and that in the midst of keenest pleasure. They know this pain equally who have forsaken or been forsaken by the love of their life, and in their new wives' arms are compelled to realise it. It is better to remain alone and suffer only the misery of being alone, so long as it is possible to find distraction in daily work. When that resource goes the man is to be pitied and left alone.

These things and some others Dick considered while he was holding Bessie to his heart.

'Though you mayn't know it,' he said, raising his head, 'the Lord is a just and a terrible God, Bess; with a very strong sense of humour. It serves me right—how it serves me right! Torp could understand it if he were here; he must have suffered something at your hands, child, but only for a minute or so. I saved him. Set that to my credit, some one.'

'Let me go,' said Bess, her face darkening. 'Let me go.'

'All in good time. Did you ever attend Sunday school?'

'Never. Let me go, I tell you; you're making fun of me.'

'Indeed, I'm not. I'm making fun of myself. . . . Thus. "He saved others, himself he cannot

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save." It isn't exactly a school-board text.' He released her wrist, but since he was between her and the door she could not escape. 'What an enormous amount of mischief one little woman can do!'

'I'm sorry; I'm awful sorry about the picture.'

'I'm not. I'm grateful to you for spoiling it. . . . What were we talking about before you mentioned the thing?'

'About getting away—and money. Me and you going away.'

'Of course. We will get away—that is to say, I will.'

'And me?'

'You shall have fifty whole pounds for spoiling a picture.'

'Then you won't——?'

'I'm afraid not, dear. Think of fifty pounds for pretty things all to yourself.'

'You said you couldn't do anything without me.'

'That was true a little while ago. I'm better now, thank you. Get me my hat.'

'S'pose I don't?'

'Beeton will, and you'll lose fifty pounds. That's all. Get it.'

Bessie cursed under her breath. She had pitied the man sincerely, had kissed him with

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almost equal sincerity, for he was not unhandsome; it pleased her to be in a way and for a time his protector, and above all there were four thousand pounds to be handled by some one. Now through a slip of the tongue and a little feminine desire to give a little, not too much, pain she had lost the money, the blessed idleness and the pretty things, the companionship, and the chance of looking outwardly as respectable as a real lady.

‘Now fill me a pipe. Tobacco doesn’t taste, but it doesn’t matter, and I’ll think things out. What’s the day of the week, Bess?’

‘Tuesday.’

‘Then Thursday’s mail-day. What a fool—what a blind fool I have been! Twenty-two pounds covers my passage home again. Allow ten for additional expenses. We must put up at Madame Binat’s for old sake’s sake. Thirty-two pounds altogether. Add a hundred for the cost of the last trip—Gad, won’t Torp stare to see me!—a hundred and thirty-two leaves seventy-eight for *baksheesh*—I shall need it—and to play with. What are you crying for, Bess? It wasn’t your fault, child; it was mine altogether. Oh, you funny little opossum, mop your eyes and take me out! I want the pass-book and the check-book. Stop a minute. Four thousand pounds at four per cent—that’s safe interest—means a hundred

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and sixty pounds a year; one hundred and twenty pounds a year—also safe—is two eighty, and two hundred and eighty pounds added to three hundred a year means gilded luxury for a single woman. Bess, we'll go to the bank.'

Richer by two hundred and ten pounds stored in his money belt, Dick caused Bessie, now thoroughly bewildered, to hurry from the bank to the P. and O. offices, where he explained things tersely.

'Port Said, single first; cabin as close to the baggage-hatch as possible. What ship's going?'

'The *Colgong*,' said the clerk.

'She's a wet little hooker. Is it Tilbury and a tender, or Galleons and the docks?'

'Galleons. Twelve-forty, Thursday.'

'Thanks. Change, please. I can't see very well—will you count it into my hand?'

'If they all took their passages like that instead of talking about their trunks, life would be worth something,' said the clerk to his neighbour, who was trying to explain to a harassed mother of many that condensed milk is just as good for babes at sea as daily dairy. Being nineteen and unmarried, he spoke with conviction.

'We are now,' quoth Dick, as they returned to the studio, patting the place where his money belt covered ticket and money, 'beyond the reach of

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man, or devil, or woman—which is much more important. I've three little affairs to carry through before Thursday, but I needn't ask you to help, Bess. Come here on Thursday morning at nine. We'll breakfast, and you shall take me down to Galleons Station.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Going away of course. What should I stay for?'

'But you can't look after yourself?'

'I can do anything. I didn't realise it before, but I can. I've done a great deal already. Resolution shall be treated to one kiss if Bessie doesn't object.' Strangely enough, Bessie objected and Dick laughed. 'I suppose you're right. Well, come at nine the day after to-morrow and you'll get your money.'

'Shall I sure?'

'I don't bilk, and you won't know whether I do or not unless you come. Oh, but it's long and long to wait! Good-bye, Bessie,—send Beeton here as you go out.'

The housekeeper came.

'What are all the fittings of my rooms worth?'

said Dick imperiously.

'Tisn't for me to say, sir. Some things is very pretty and some is wore out dreadful.'

'I'm insured for two hundred and seventy.'

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‘Insurance policies is no criterion, though I don’t say——’

‘Oh, damn your longwindedness! You’ve made your pickings out of me and the other tenants. Why, you talked of retiring and buying a public-house the other day. Give a straight answer to a straight question.’

‘Fifty,’ said Mr. Beeton, without a moment’s hesitation.

‘Double it; or I’ll break up half my sticks and burn the rest.’

He felt his way to a bookstand that supported a pile of sketch-books, and wrenched out one of the mahogany pillars.

‘That’s sinful, sir,’ said the housekeeper, alarmed.

‘It’s my own. One hundred or——’

‘One hundred it is. It’ll cost me three and six to get that there pilaster mended.’

‘I thought so. What an out and out swindler you must have been to spring that price at once!’

‘I hope I’ve done nothing to dissatisfy any of the tenants, least of all you, sir.’

‘Never mind that. Get me the money to-morrow, and see that all my clothes are packed in the little brown bullock-trunk. I’m going.’

‘But the quarter’s notice?’

‘I’ll pay forfeit. Look after the packing and leave me alone.’

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Mr. Beeton discussed this new departure with his wife, who decided that Bessie was at the bottom of it all. Her husband took a more charitable view.

‘It’s very sudden—but then he was always sudden in his ways. Listen to him now!’

There was a sound of chanting from Dick’s room.

‘We’ll never come back any more, boys,
We’ll never come back no more ;
We’ll go to the deuce on any excuse,
And never come back no more !
Oh say we’re afloat or ashore, boys,
Oh say we’re afloat or ashore ;
But we’ll never come back any more, boys,
We’ll never come back no more !’

‘Mr. Beeton! Mr. Beeton! Where the deuce is my pistol?’

‘Quick, he’s going to shoot himself—’avin’ gone mad!’ said Mrs. Beeton.

Mr. Beeton addressed Dick soothingly, but it was some time before the latter, threshing up and down his bedroom, could realise the intention of the promises to ‘find everything to-morrow, sir.’

‘Oh, you copper-nosed old fool—you impotent Academician!’ he shouted at last. ‘Do you suppose I want to shoot myself? Take the pistol in your silly shaking hand then. If *you* touch it, it will go off, because it’s loaded. It’s among my



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campaign-kit somewhere—in the parcel at the bottom of the trunk.’

Long ago Dick had carefully possessed himself of a forty-pound weight field-equipment constructed by the knowledge of his own experience. It was this put-away treasure that he was trying to find and rehandle. Mr. Beeton whipped the revolver out of its place on the top of the package, and Dick drove his hand among the *khaki* coat and breeches, the blue cloth leg-bands, and the heavy flannel shirts doubled over a pair of swan-neck spurs. Under these and the water-bottle lay a sketch-book and a pigskin case of stationery.

‘These we don’t want; you can have them, Mr. Beeton. Everything else I’ll keep. Pack ’em on the top right-hand side of my trunk. When you’ve done that come into the studio with your wife. I want you both. Wait a minute; get me a pen and a sheet of notepaper.’

It is not an easy thing to write when you cannot see, and Dick had particular reasons for wishing that his work should be clear. So he began, following his right hand with his left: “‘The badness of this writing is because I am blind and cannot see my pen.” H’mph!—Even a lawyer can’t mistake that. It must be signed, I suppose, but it needn’t be witnessed. Now an inch lower—why did I never learn to use a type-writer?

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—"This is the last will and testament of me, Richard Helder. I am in sound bodily and mental health, and there is no previous will to revoke."

—That's all right. Damn the pen! Whereabouts on the paper was I?—"I leave everything that I possess in the world, including four thousand pounds, and two thousand seven hundred and twenty-eight pounds held for me"—Oh, I can't get this straight.' He tore off half the sheet and began again with the caution about the handwriting. Then: 'I leave all the money I possess in the world to'—here followed Maisie's name, and the names of the two banks that held his money.

'It mayn't be quite regular, but no one has a shadow of a right to dispute it, and I've given Maisie's address. Come in, Mr. Beeton. This is my signature; you've seen it often enough to know it; I want you and your wife to witness it. Thanks. To-morrow you must take me to the landlord and I'll pay forfeit for leaving without notice, and I'll lodge this paper with him in case anything happens when I'm away. Now we're going to light up the studio stove. Stay with me, and give me my papers as I want 'em.'

No one knows until he has tried how fine a blaze a year's accumulation of bills, letters, and dockets can make. Dick stuffed into the stove every document in the studio—saving only three

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unopened letters : destroyed sketch-books, rough note-books, new and half-finished canvases alike.

‘What a lot of rubbish a tenant gets about him if he stays long enough in one place, to be sure,’ said Mr. Beeton at last.

‘He does. Is there anything more left?’ Dick felt round the walls.

‘Not a thing, and the stove’s nigh red-hot.’

‘Excellent, and you’ve lost about a thousand pounds’ worth of sketches. Ho! ho! Quite a thousand pounds’ worth, if I can remember what I used to be.’

‘Yes, sir,’ politely. Mr. Beeton was quite sure that Dick had gone mad, otherwise he would have never parted with his excellent furniture for a song. The canvas things took up storage room and were much better out of the way.

There remained only to leave the little will in safe hands : that could not be accomplished till to-morrow. Dick groped about the floor picking up the last pieces of paper, assured himself again and again that there remained no written word or sign of his past life in drawer or desk, and sat down before the stove till the fire died out and the contracting iron cracked in the silence of the night.

CHAPTER XV

With a heart of furious fancies,
Whereof I am commander ;
With a burning spear and a horse of air,
To the wilderness I wander.
With a knight of ghosts and shadows
I summoned am to tourney—
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end,
Methinks it is no journey.

Tom a' Bedlam's Song.

'GOOD-BYE, Bess ; I promised you fifty. Here's a hundred—all that I got for my furniture from Beeton. That will keep you in pretty frocks for some time. You've been a good little girl, all things considered, but you've given me and Torpenhow a fair amount of trouble.'

'Give Mr. Torpenhow my love if you see him, won't you?'

'Of course I will, dear. Now take me up the gang-plank and into the cabin. Once aboard the lugger and the maid is—and I am free, I mean.'

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‘Who’ll look after you on the ship?’

‘The head-steward, if there’s any use in money. The doctor when we come to Port Said, if I know anything of P. and O. doctors. After that, the Lord will provide, as He used to do.’

Bess found Dick his cabin in the wild turmoil of a ship full of leavetakers and weeping relatives. Then he kissed her, and laid himself down in his bunk until the decks should be clear. He who had taken so long to move about his own darkened rooms well understood the geography of a ship, and the necessity of seeing to his own comforts was as wine to him. Before the screw began to thrash the ship along the Docks he had been introduced to the head-steward, had royally tipped him, secured a good place at table, opened out his baggage, and settled himself down with joy in the cabin. It was scarcely necessary to feel his way as he moved about, for he knew everything so well. Then God was very kind; a deep sleep of weariness came upon him just as he would have thought of Maisie, and he slept till the steamer had cleared the mouth of the Thames and was lifting to the pulse of the Channel.

The rattle of the engines, the reek of oil and paint, and a very familiar sound in the next cabin roused him to his new inheritance.

‘Oh, it’s good to be alive again!’ He yawned,

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stretched himself vigorously, and went on deck to be told that they were almost abreast of the lights of Brighton. This is no more open water than Trafalgar Square is a common; the free levels begin at Ushant; but none the less Dick could feel the healing of the sea at work upon him already. A boisterous little cross-swell swung the steamer disrespectfully by the nose; and one wave breaking far aft splattered the quarterdeck and the pile of new deck chairs. He heard the foam fall with the clash of broken glass, was stung in the face by a cupful, and sniffing luxuriously, felt his way to the smoking-room by the wheel. There a strong breeze found him, blew his cap off and left him bareheaded in the doorway, and the smoking-room steward, understanding that he was a voyager of experience, said that the weather would be stiff in the chops off the Channel and more than half a gale in the Bay. These things fell as they were foretold, and Dick enjoyed himself to the utmost. It is allowable and even necessary at sea to lay firm hold upon tables, stanchions, and ropes in moving from place to place. On land the man who feels with his hands is patently blind. At sea even a blind man who is not sea-sick can jest with the doctor over the weakness of his fellows. Dick told the doctor many tales—and these are coin of more value

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than silver if properly handled—smoked with him till unholy hours of the night, and so won his short-lived regard that he promised Dick a few hours of his time when they came to Port Said.

And the sea roared or was still as the winds blew, and the engines sang their song day and night, and the sun grew stronger day by day, and Tom the Lascar barber shaved Dick of a morning under the opened hatch-grating where the cool winds blew, and the awnings were spread and the passengers made merry, and at last they came to Port Said.

‘Take me,’ said Dick to the doctor, ‘to Madame Binat’s—if you know where that is.’

‘Whew!’ said the doctor, ‘I do. There’s not much to choose between ’em; but I suppose you’re aware that that’s one of the worst houses in the place. They’ll rob you to begin with, and knife you later.’

‘Not they. Take me there, and I can look after myself.’

So he was brought to Madame Binat’s and filled his nostrils with the well-remembered smell of the East, that runs without a change from the Canal head to Hong-Kong, and his mouth with the villainous *Lingua Franca* of the Levant. The heat smote him between the shoulder-blades with the buffet of an old friend, his feet slipped on the

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sand, and his coat-sleeve was warm as new-baked bread when he lifted it to his nose.

Madame Binat smiled with the smile that knows no astonishment when Dick entered the drinking-shop which was one source of her gains. But for a little accident of complete darkness he could hardly realise that he had ever quitted the old life that hummed in his ears. Somebody opened a bottle of peculiarly strong Schiedam. The smell reminded Dick of Monsieur Binat, who, by the way, had spoken of art and degradation. Binat was dead; Madame said as much when the doctor departed, scandalised, so far as a ship's doctor can be, at the warmth of Dick's reception. Dick was delighted at it. 'They remember me here after a year. They have forgotten me across the water by this time. Madame, I want a long talk with you when you're at liberty. It is good to be back again.'

In the evening she set an iron-topped café-table out on the sands, and Dick and she sat by it, while the house behind them filled with riot, merriment, oaths, and threats. The stars came out and the lights of the shipping in the harbour twinkled by the head of the Canal.

'Yes. The war is good for trade, my friend; but what dost thou do here? We have not forgotten thee.'

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‘I was over there in England and I went blind.’

‘But there was the glory first. We heard of it here, even here—I and Binat; and thou hast used the head of Yellow Tina—she is still alive—so often and so well that Tina laughed when the papers arrived by the mail-boats. It was always something that we here could recognise in the paintings. And then there was always the glory and the money for thee.’

‘I am not poor—I shall pay you well.’

‘Not to me. Thou hast paid for everything.’ Under her breath, ‘Mon Dieu, to be blind and so young! What horror!’

Dick could not see her face with the pity on it, or his own with the discoloured hair at the temples. He did not feel the need of pity; he was too anxious to get to the front once more, and explained his desire.

‘And where? The Canal is full of the English ships. Sometimes they fire as they used to do when the war was here—ten years ago. Beyond Cairo there is fighting, but how canst thou go there without a correspondent’s passport? And in the desert there is always fighting, but that is impossible also,’ said she.

‘I must go to Suakin.’ He knew, thanks to Alf’s readings, that Torpenhow was at work with the column that was protecting the construction of

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the Suakin-Berber line. P. and O. steamers do not touch at that port, and, besides, Madame Binat knew everybody whose help or advice was worth anything. They were not respectable folk, but they could cause things to be accomplished, which is much more important when there is work toward.

‘But at Suakin they are always fighting. That desert breeds men always—and always more men. And they are so bold! Why to Suakin?’

‘My friend is there.’

‘Thy friend! Chtt! Thy friend is death, then.’

Madame Binat dropped a fat arm on the table-top, filled Dick’s glass anew, and looked at him closely under the stars. There was no need that he should bow his head in assent and say—

‘No. He is a man, but—if it should arrive . . . blamest thou?’

‘I blame?’ she laughed shrilly. ‘Who am I that I should blame any one—except those who try to cheat me over their consummations. But it is very terrible.’

‘I must go to Suakin. Think for me. A great deal has changed within the year, and the men I knew are not here. The Egyptian light-house steamer goes down the Canal to Suakin—and the post-boats—But even then—’



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‘Do not think any longer. I know, and it is for me to think. Thou shalt go—thou shalt go and see thy friend. Be wise. Sit here until the house is a little quiet—I must attend to my guests—and afterwards go to bed. Thou shalt go, in truth, thou shalt go.’

‘To-morrow?’

‘As soon as may be.’ She was talking as though he were a child.

He sat at the table listening to the voices in the harbour and the streets, and wondering how soon the end would come, till Madame Binat carried him off to bed and ordered him to sleep. The house shouted and sang and danced and revelled, Madame Binat moving through it with one eye on the liquor payments and the girls and the other on Dick’s interests. To this latter end she smiled upon scowling and furtive Turkish officers of Fellaheen regiments, was gracious to Cypriote commissariat underlings, and more than kind to camel agents of no nationality whatever.

In the early morning, being then appropriately dressed in a flaming red silk ball-dress, with a front of tarnished gold embroidery and a necklace of plate-glass diamonds, she made chocolate and carried it in to Dick.

‘It is only I, and I am of discreet age, eh? Drink and eat the roll too. Thus in France

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mothers bring their sons, when those behave wisely, the morning chocolate.' She sat down on the side of the bed whispering:—

'It is all arranged. Thou wilt go by the lighthouse boat. That is a bribe of ten pounds English. The captain is never paid by the Government. The boat comes to Suakin in four days. There will go with thee George, a Greek muleteer. Another bribe of ten pounds. I will pay; they must not know of thy money. George will go with thee as far as he goes with his mules. Then he comes back to me, for his well-beloved is here, and if I do not receive a telegram from Suakin saying that thou art well, the girl answers for George.'

'Thank you.' He reached out sleepily for the cup. 'You are much too kind, Madame.'

'If there were anything that I might do I would say, stay here and be wise; but I do not think that would be best for thee.' She looked at her liquor-stained dress with a sad smile. 'Nay, thou shalt go, in truth, thou shalt go. It is best so. My boy, it is best so.'

She stooped and kissed Dick between the eyes. 'That is for good-morning,' she said, going away. 'When thou art dressed we will speak to George and make everything ready. But first we must open the little trunk. Give me the keys.'

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‘The amount of kissing lately has been simply scandalous. I shall expect Torp to kiss me next. He is more likely to swear at me for getting in his way, though. Well, it won’t last long—Ohé, Madame, help me to my toilette of the guillotine! There will be no chance of dressing properly out yonder.’

He was rummaging among his new campaign-kit, and rowelling his hands with the spurs. There are two ways of wearing well-oiled ankle-jacks, spotless blue leg-bands, *khaki* coat and breeches, and a perfectly pipeclayed helmet. The right way is the way of the untired man, master of himself, setting out upon an expedition, well pleased.

‘Everything must be very correct,’ Dick explained. ‘It will become dirty afterwards, but now it is good to feel well dressed. Is everything as it should be?’

He patted the revolver neatly hidden under the fulness of the blouse on the right hip and fingered his collar.

‘I can do no more,’ Madame said, between laughing and crying. ‘Look at thyself—but I forgot.’

‘I am very content.’ He stroked the creaseless spirals of his leggings. ‘Now let us go and see the captain and George and the lighthouse boat. Be quick, Madame.’

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‘But thou canst not be seen by the harbour walking with me in the daylight. Figure to yourself if some English ladies——’

‘There are no English ladies; and if there are, I have forgotten them. Take me there.’

In spite of his burning impatience it was nearly evening ere the lighthouse boat began to move. Madame had said a great deal both to George and the captain touching the arrangements that were to be made for Dick’s benefit. Very few men who had the honour of her acquaintance cared to disregard Madame’s advice. That sort of contempt might end in being knifed by a stranger in a gambling hell upon surprisingly short provocation.

For six days—two of them were wasted in the crowded Canal—the little steamer worked her way to Suakin, where she was to pick up the superintendent of lighthouses; and Dick made it his business to propitiate George, who was distracted with fears for the safety of his light-of-love and half inclined to make Dick responsible for his own discomfort. When they arrived George took him under his wing, and together they entered the red-hot seaport, encumbered with the material and wastage of the Suakin-Berber line, from locomotives in disconsolate fragments to mounds of chairs and pot-sleepers.



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‘If you keep with me,’ said George, ‘nobody will ask for passports or what you do. They are all very busy.’

‘Yes; but I should like to hear some of the Englishmen talk. They might remember me. I was known here a long time ago—when I was some one indeed.’

‘A long time ago is a very long time ago here. The graveyards are full. Now listen. This new railway runs out so far as Tanai-el-Hassan—that is seven miles. Then there is a camp. They say that beyond Tanai-el-Hassan the English troops go forward, and everything that they require will be brought to them by this line.’

‘Ah! Base camp. I see. That’s a better business than fighting Fuzzies in the open.’

‘For this reason even the mules go up in the iron-train.’

‘Iron what?’

‘It is all covered with iron, because it is still being shot at.’

‘An armoured train. Better and better! Go on, faithful George.’

‘And I go up with my mules to-night. Only those who particularly require to go to the camp go out with the train. They begin to shoot not far from the city.’

‘The dears—they always used to!’ Dick

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snuffed the smell of parched dust, heated iron, and flaking paint with delight. Certainly the old life was welcoming him back most generously.

'When I have got my mules together I go up to-night, but you must first send a telegram to Port Said, declaring that I have done you no harm.'

'Madame has you well in hand. Would you stick a knife into me if you had the chance?'

'I have no chance,' said the Greek. '*She* is there with that woman.'

'I see. It's a bad thing to be divided between love of woman and the chance of loot. I sympathise with you, George.'

They went to the telegraph-office unquestioned, for all the world was desperately busy and had scarcely time to turn its head, and Suakin was the last place under sky that would be chosen for holiday-ground. On their return the voice of an English subaltern asked Dick what he was doing. The blue goggles were over his eyes and he walked with his hand on George's elbow as he replied—

'Egyptian Government—mules. My orders are to give them over to the A. C. G. at Tanai-el-Hassan. Any occasion to show my papers?'

'Oh, certainly not. I beg your pardon. I'd no right to ask, but not seeing your face before I——'



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'I go out in the train to-night, I suppose,' said Dick boldly. 'There will be no difficulty in loading up the mules, will there?'

'You can see the horse-platforms from here. You must have them loaded up early.' The young man went away wondering what sort of broken-down waif this might be who talked like a gentleman and consorted with Greek muleteers. Dick felt unhappy. To outface an English officer is no small thing, but the bluff loses relish when one plays it from the utter dark, and stumbles up and down rough ways, thinking and eternally thinking of what might have been if things had fallen out otherwise, and all had been as it was not.

George shared his meal with Dick and went off to the mule-lines. His charge sat alone in a shed with his face in his hands. Before his tight-shut eyes danced the face of Maisie, laughing, with parted lips. There was a great bustle and clamour about him. He grew afraid and almost called for George.

'I say, have you got your mules ready?' It was the voice of the subaltern over his shoulder.

'My man's looking after them. The—the fact is I've a touch of ophthalmia and I can't see very well.'

'By Jove! that's bad. You ought to lie up in

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hospital for a while. I've had a turn of it myself. It's as bad as being blind.'

'So I find it. When does this armoured train go?'

'At six o'clock. It takes an hour to cover the seven miles.'

'Are the Fuzzies on the rampage—eh?'

'About three nights a week. 'Fact is I'm in acting command of the night-train. It generally runs back empty to Tanai for the night.'

'Big camp at Tanai, I suppose?'

'Pretty big. It has to feed our desert-column somehow.'

'Is that far off?'

'Between thirty and forty miles—in an infernal thirsty country.'

'Is the country quiet between Tanai and our men?'

'More or less. I shouldn't care to cross it alone, or with a subaltern's command for the matter of that, but the scouts get through in some extraordinary fashion.'

'They always did.'

'Have you been here before, then?'

'I was through most of the trouble when it first broke out.'

'In the service and cashiered' was the subaltern's first thought, so he refrained from putting any questions.

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‘There’s your man coming up with the mules. It seems rather queer ——’

‘That I should be mule-leading?’ said Dick.

‘I didn’t mean to say so, but it is. Forgive me—it’s beastly impertinence I know, but you speak like a man who has been at a public school. There’s no mistaking the tone.’

‘I am a public school man.’

‘I thought so. I say, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you’re a little down on your luck, aren’t you? I saw you sitting with your head in your hands, and that’s why I spoke.’

‘Thanks. I am about as thoroughly and completely broke as a man need be.’

‘Suppose—I mean I’m a public school man myself. Couldn’t I perhaps—take it as a loan y’ know and——’

‘You’re much too good, but on my honour I’ve as much money as I want. . . . I tell you what you could do for me, though, and put me under an everlasting obligation. Let me come into the bogie truck of the train. There is a fore-truck, isn’t there?’

‘Yes. How d’you know?’

‘I’ve been in an armoured train before. Only let me see—hear some of the fun I mean, and I’ll be grateful. I go at my own risk as a non-combatant.’

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The young man thought for a minute. 'All right,' he said. 'We're supposed to be an empty train, and there's no one to blow me up at the other end.'

George and a horde of yelling amateur assistants had loaded up the mules, and the narrow-gauge armoured train, plated with three-eighths inch boiler-plate till it looked like one long coffin, stood ready to start.

Two bogie trucks running before the locomotive were completely covered in with plating, except that the leading one was pierced in front for the nozzle of a machine-gun, and the second at either side for lateral fire. The trucks together made one long iron-vaulted chamber in which a score of artillerymen were rioting.

'Whitechapel — last train! Ah, I see yer kissin' in the first class there!' somebody shouted, just as Dick was clambering into the forward truck.

'Lordy! 'Ere's a real live passenger for the Kew, Tanai, Acton, and Ealin' train. *Echo*, sir. Speshul edition! *Star*, sir.'—'Shall I get you a foot-warmer?' said another.

'Thanks. I'll pay my footing,' said Dick, and relations of the most amicable were established ere silence came with the arrival of the subaltern, and the train jolted out over the rough track.

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'This is an immense improvement on shooting the unimpressonable Fuzzy in the open,' said Dick from his place in the corner.

'Oh, but he's still unimpressed. There he goes!' said the subaltern, as a bullet struck the outside of the truck. 'We always have at least one demonstration against the night-train. Generally they attack the rear-truck where my junior commands. He gets all the fun of the fair.'

'Not to-night, though! Listen!' said Dick. A flight of heavy-handed bullets was succeeded by yelling and shouts. The children of the desert valued their nightly amusement, and the train was an excellent mark.

'Is it worth while giving them half a hopper full?' the subaltern asked of the engine which was driven by a Lieutenant of Sappers.

'I should just think so! This is my section of the line. They'll be playing old Harry with my permanent way if we don't stop 'em.'

'Right O!'

'*Hrrmph!*' said the machine-gun through all its five noses as the subaltern drew the lever home. The empty cartridges clashed on the floor and the smoke blew back through the truck. There was indiscriminate firing at the rear of the train, a return fire from the darkness without and unlimited howling. Dick stretched himself on the

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floor, wild with delight at the sounds and the smells.

‘God is very good—I never thought I’d hear this again. Give ’em hell, men. Oh, give ’em hell!’ he cried.

The train stopped for some obstruction on the line ahead and a party went out to reconnoitre, but came back cursing, for spades. The children of the desert had piled sand and gravel on the rails, and twenty minutes were lost in clearing it away. Then the slow progress recommenced, to be varied with more shots, more shoutings, the steady clack and kick of the machine-guns, and a final difficulty with a half-lifted rail ere the train came under the protection of the roaring camp at Tanai-el-Hassan.

‘Now, you see why it takes an hour and a half to fetch her through,’ said the subaltern, unshipping the cartridge-hopper above his pet gun.

‘It was a lark, though. I only wish it had lasted twice as long. How superb it must have looked from outside!’ said Dick, sighing regretfully.

‘It palls after the first few nights. By the way, when you’ve settled about your mules, come and see what we can find to eat in my tent. I’m Bennil of the Gunners—in the artillery lines—and mind you don’t fall over my tent-ropes in the dark.’

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But it was all dark to Dick. He could only smell the camels, the hay-bales, the cooking, the smoky fires, and the tanned canvas of the tents as he stood, where he had dropped from the train, shouting for George. There was a sound of light-hearted kicking on the iron skin of the rear trucks, with squealing and grunting. George was unloading the mules.

The engine was blowing off steam nearly in Dick's ear; a cold wind of the desert danced between his legs; he was hungry, and felt tired and dirty—so dirty that he tried to brush his coat with his hands. That was a hopeless job; he thrust his hands into his pockets and began to count over the many times that he had waited in strange or remote places for trains or camels, mules or horses, to carry him to his business. In those days he could see—few men more clearly—and the spectacle of an armed camp at dinner under the stars was an ever fresh pleasure to the eye. There was colour, light, and motion, without which no man has much pleasure in living. This night there remained for him only one more journey through the darkness that never lifts to tell a man how far he has travelled. Then he would grip Torpenhow's hand again—Torpenhow, who was alive and strong, and lived in the midst of the action that had once made the reputation of a man called Dick Helder:

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

not in the least to be confused with the blind, bewildered vagabond who seemed to answer to the same name. Yes, he would find Torpenhow, and come as near to the old life as might be. Afterwards he would forget everything: Bessie, who had wrecked the *Melancolia* and so nearly wrecked his life; Beeton, who lived in a strange unreal city full of tin-tacks and gas-plugs, and matters that no men needed; that irrational being who had offered him love and loyalty for nothing, but had not signed her name; and most of all Maisie, who, from her own point of view, was undeniably right in all she did, but oh, at this distance, so tantalisingly fair.

George's hand on his arm pulled him back to the situation.

'And what now?' said George.

'Oh yes, of course. What now? Take me to the camel-men. Take me to where the scouts sit when they come in from the desert. They sit by their camels, and the camels eat grain out of a black blanket held up at the corners, and the men eat by their side just like camels. Take me there!'

The camp was rough and ratty, and Dick stumbled many times over the stumps of scrub. The scouts were sitting by their beasts, as Dick knew they would. The light of the dung-fires

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flickered on their bearded faces, and the camels bubbled and mumbled beside them at rest. It was no part of Dick's policy to go into the desert with a convoy of supplies. That would lead to impertinent questions, and since a blind non-combatant is not needed at the front, he would probably be forced to return to Suakin. He must go up alone, and go immediately.

'Now for one last bluff—the biggest of all,' he said. 'Peace be with you, brethren!' The watchful George steered him to the circle of the nearest fire. The heads of the camel-sheiks bowed gravely, and the camels, scenting a European, looked sideways curiously like brooding hens, half ready to get to their feet.

'A beast and a driver to go to the fighting line to-night,' said Dick.

'A Mulaid?' said a voice, scornfully naming the best baggage-breed that he knew.

'A Bisharin,' returned Dick with perfect gravity. 'A Bisharin without saddle-galls. Therefore no charge of thine, shock-head.'

Two or three minutes passed. Then—

'We be knee-haltered for the night. There is no going out from the camp.'

'Not for money?'

'H'm! Ah! English money?'

Another depressing interval of silence.

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‘How much?’

‘Twenty-five pounds English paid into the hand of the driver at my journey’s end, and as much more into the hand of the camel-sheik here, to be paid when the driver returns.’

This was royal payment, and the sheik, who knew that he would get his commission on the deposit, stirred in Dick’s behalf.

‘For scarcely one night’s journey—fifty pounds. Land and wells and good trees and wives to make a man content for the rest of his days. Who speaks?’ said Dick.

‘I,’ said a voice. ‘I will go—but there is no going from the camp.’

‘Fool! I know that a camel can break his knee-halter, and the sentries do not fire if one goes in chase. Twenty-five pounds and another twenty-five pounds. But the beast must be a good Bisharin; I will take no baggage-camel.’

Then the bargaining began, and at the end of half an hour the first deposit was paid over to the sheik, who talked in low tones to the driver. Dick heard the latter say: ‘A little way out only. Any baggage-beast will serve. Am I a fool to waste my cattle for a blind man?’

‘And though I cannot see’—Dick lifted his voice a little—‘yet I carry that which has six eyes, and the driver will sit before me. If we do not

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reach the English troops in the dawn he will be dead.'

'But where, in God's name, are the troops?'

'Unless thou knowest let another man ride. *Dost thou know?* Remember it will be life or death to thee.'

'I know,' said the driver sullenly. 'Stand back from my beast. I am going to slip him.'

'Not so swiftly. George, hold the camel's head a moment. I want to feel his cheek.' The hands wandered over the hide till they found the branded half-circle that is the mark of the Bisharin, the light-built riding-camel. 'That is well. Cut this one loose. Remember no blessing of God comes on those who try to cheat the blind.'

The men chuckled by the fires at the camel-driver's discomfiture. He had intended to substitute a slow, saddle-galled baggage-colt.

'Stand back!' one shouted, lashing the Bisharin under the belly with a quirt. Dick obeyed as soon as he felt the nose-string tighten in his hand,—and a cry went up, 'Illaha! Aho! He is loose.'

With a roar and a grunt the Bisharin rose to his feet and plunged forward towards the desert, his driver following with shouts and lamentation. George caught Dick's arm and hurried him stumbling and tripping past a disgusted sentry who was used to stampeding camels.

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'What's the row now?' he cried.

'Every stitch of my kit on that blasted dromedary,' Dick answered, after the manner of a common soldier.

'Go on, and take care your throat's not cut outside—you and your dromedary's.'

The outcries ceased when the camel had disappeared behind a hillock, and his driver had called him back and made him kneel down.

'Mount first,' said Dick. Then climbing into the second seat and gently screwing the pistol muzzle into the small of his companion's back, 'Go on, in God's name, and swiftly. Good-bye, George. Remember me to Madame, and have a good time with your girl. Get forward, child of the Pit!'

A few minutes later he was shut up in a great silence, hardly broken by the creaking of the saddle and the soft pad of the tireless feet. Dick adjusted himself comfortably to the rock and pitch of the pace, girthed his belt tighter, and felt the darkness slide past. For an hour he was conscious only of the sense of rapid progress.

'A good camel,' he said at last.

'He has never been underfed. He is my own and clean bred,' the driver replied.

'Go on.'

His head dropped on his chest and he tried to



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think, but the tenor of his thoughts was broken because he was very sleepy. In the half doze it seemed that he was learning a punishment hymn at Mrs. Jennett's. He had committed some crime as bad as Sabbath-breaking, and she had locked him up in his bedroom. But he could never repeat more than the first two lines of the hymn—

When Israel of the Lord beloved
Out of the land of bondage came.

He said them over and over thousands of times. The driver turned in the saddle to see if there were any chance of capturing the revolver and ending the ride. Dick roused, struck him over the head with the butt, and stormed himself wide awake. Somebody hidden in a clump of camel-thorn shouted as the camel toiled up rising ground. A shot was fired, and the silence shut down again, bringing the desire to sleep. Dick could think no longer. He was too tired and stiff and cramped to do more than nod uneasily from time to time, waking with a start and punching the driver with the pistol.

'Is there a moon?' he asked drowsily.

'She is near her setting.'

'I wish that I could see her. Halt the camel. At least let me hear the desert talk.'

The man obeyed. Out of the utter stillness

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came one breath of wind. It rattled the dead leaves of a shrub some distance away and ceased. A handful of dry earth detached itself from the edge of a rain trench and crumbled softly to the bottom.

‘Go on. The night is very cold.’

Those who have watched till the morning know how the last hour before the light lengthens itself into many eternities. It seemed to Dick that he had never since the beginning of original darkness done anything at all save jolt through the air. Once in a thousand years he would finger the nail-heads on the saddle-front and count them all carefully. Centuries later he would shift his revolver from his right hand to his left, and allow the eased arm to drop down at his side. From the safe distance of London he was watching himself thus employed,—watching critically. Yet whenever he put out his hand to the canvas that he might paint the tawny yellow desert under the glare of the sinking moon, the black shadow of the camel and the two bowed figures atop, that hand held a revolver and the arm was numbed from wrist to collar-bone. Moreover, he was in the dark, and could see no canvas of any kind whatever.

The driver grunted, and Dick was conscious of a change in the air.

‘I smell the dawn,’ he whispered.

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'It is here, and yonder are the troops. Have I done well?'

The camel stretched out its neck and roared as there came down wind the pungent reek of camels in square.

'Go on. We must get there swiftly. Go on.'

'They are moving in their camp. There is so much dust that I cannot see what they do.'

'Am I in better case? Go forward.'

They could hear the hum of voices ahead, the howling and the bubbling of the beasts and the hoarse cries of the soldiers girthing up for the day. Two or three shots were fired.

'Is that at us? Surely they can see that I am English,' Dick spoke angrily.

'Nay, it is from the desert,' the driver answered, cowering in his saddle. 'Go forward, my child! Well it is that the dawn did not uncover us an hour ago.'

The camel headed straight for the column and the shots behind multiplied. The children of the desert had arranged that most uncomfortable of surprises, a dawn attack for the English troops, and were getting their distance by snap-shots at the only moving object without the square.

'What luck! What stupendous and imperial luck!' said Dick. 'It's "just before the battle, mother." Oh, God has been most good to me!

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Only'—the agony of the thought made him screw up his eyes for an instant—'Maisie . . .'

'Allahu! We are in,' said the man, as he drove into the rearguard and the camel knelt.

'Who the deuce are you? Despatches or what? What's the strength of the enemy behind that ridge? How did you get through?' asked a dozen voices. For all answer Dick took a long breath, unbuckled his belt, and shouted from the saddle at the top of a wearied and dusty voice, 'Torpenhow! Ohé, Torp! Coo-ee, Tor-pen-how.'

A bearded man raking in the ashes of a fire for a light to his pipe moved very swiftly towards that cry, as the rearguard, facing about, began to fire at the puffs of smoke from the hillocks around. Gradually the scattered white cloudlets drew out into long lines of banked white that hung heavily in the stillness of the dawn before they turned over wave-like and glided into the valleys. The soldiers in the square were coughing and swearing as their own smoke obstructed their view, and they edged forward to get beyond it. A wounded camel leaped to its feet and roared aloud, the cry ending in a bubbling grunt. Some one had cut its throat to prevent confusion. Then came the thick sob of a man receiving his death-wound from a bullet; then a yell of agony and redoubled firing.

There was no time to ask any questions.

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‘Get down, man! Get down behind the camel!’

‘No. Put me, I pray, in the forefront of the battle.’ Dick turned his face to Torpenhow and raised his hand to set his helmet straight, but, miscalculating the distance, knocked it off. Torpenhow saw that his hair was gray on the temples, and that his face was the face of an old man.

‘Come down, you damned fool! Dickie, come off!’

And Dick came obediently, but as a tree falls, pitching sideways from the Bisharin’s saddle at Torpenhow’s feet. His luck had held to the last, even to the crowning mercy of a kindly bullet through his head.

Torpenhow knelt under the lee of the camel, with Dick’s body in his arms.

THE END

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